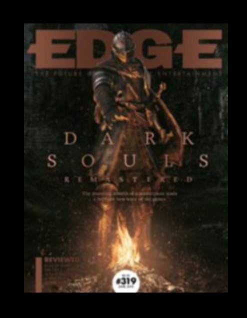

EDGE
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
DARK SOULS
REMASTERED
The stunning rebirth of a masterpiece leads
a brilliant new wave of old games
REVIEWED
GOD OF WAR
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SEA OF THIEVES
A WAY OUT
EXTINCTION
#319
JUNE 2018



Memories, pressed between the pages of our minds



Videogames are built, fundamentally, to entertain. But anyone who wants to have a lasting impact is in the business of making memories. Developers are becoming master engineers of each part of the cycle of nostalgia, and much of what fills this month's **Edge** concerns it: the creating, fading, and resurfacing of memory.

Labo, Nintendo's hot new Switch peripheral fashioned from cardboard and string, is part time machine, the sensation of the material in your hand recalling childhood days spent piloting DIY spaceships. And, judging by the highly selective press events, Nintendo hopes Labo will be a parent-child bonding exercise, helping to make a few memories of its own.

Elsewhere, the theme continues. *God Of War* recontextualises the brutish Kratos in a father-son tale that knows when to bring up the past, with bold new moments that linger in the mind long after the credits roll. Meanwhile, multiplayer pirate adventure *Sea Of Thieves* may not have fully fulfilled its potential, but we'll cherish the anecdotes and friendships it's generated as genuinely as if they'd unfolded in the real world.

On p76, we look at how VR devs are discovering how best to make you feel as though you've lived something for real. Unexpectedly, shaping emotional connections isn't necessarily always about interaction. Indeed, anyone who grew up watching siblings hog the console or PC knows you can form deep attachments to games without pressing a single button.

Still, we can't help but feel that the real soul bonds are forged in fire, in the sweat of your brow and the cramp of your hand as you finally fell that wretched dragon slayer and that bloody executioner. *Dark Souls Remastered* brings with it a flood of memories, both painful and joyous, and looks a good deal more sumptuous than it did way back in 2011. The people behind the modern remasters of our favourite games have taken their craft to a new level – but not without effort that can make Ornstein and Smough seem like pussycats in comparison. The story begins on p60.

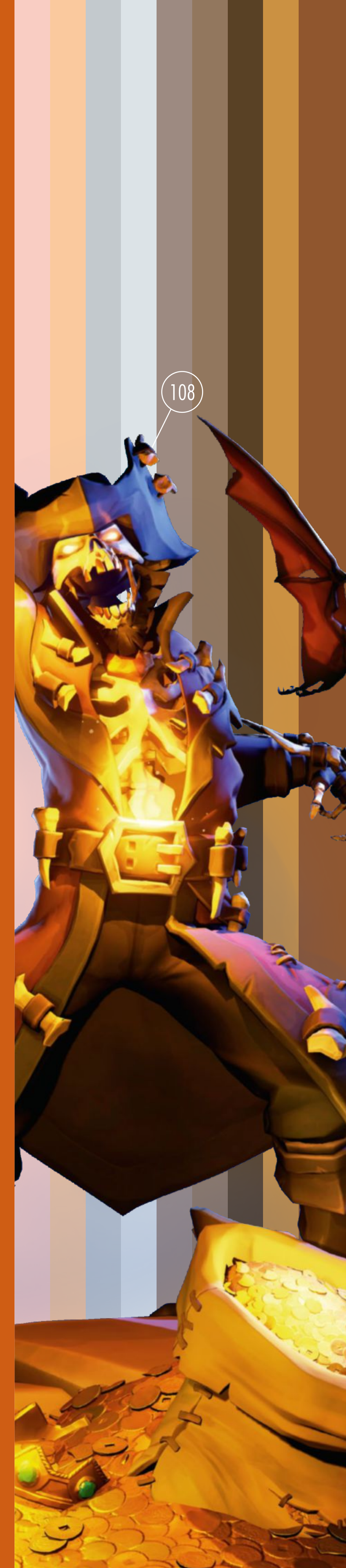


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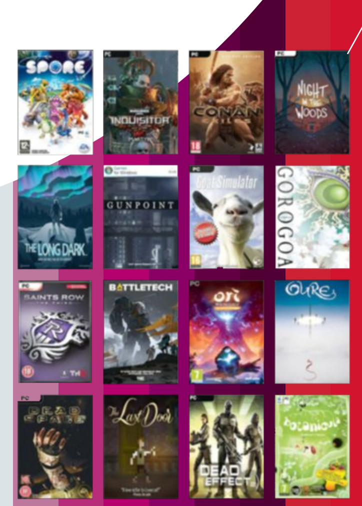
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MY MEMORY OF US

In the darkest time always look for hope

COMING THIS YEAR

MyMemoryOfUs.com











The folding stuff

Will Labo be Nintendo's biggest mainstream success since Wii Sports?

Picture, if you will, an alternate reality where Nintendo had issued a press release before the Labo reveal video went live. Imagine for a moment that it had somehow tried to explain the precise nature of this strange new venture in words. We'd think this venerable company, having enjoyed the most extraordinary creative and commercial recovery during Switch's first year, had suddenly lost its mind. You can imagine the tittering responses – indeed, there were still a few of those once Labo had been unveiled. This so-called 'new way to play' was all about cardboard? How wilfully obtuse. But then people lost their minds in a different way. Yes, it still seemed slightly silly, but it was also rare, strange and undeniably exciting. And categorically, unquestionably, a new way to play.

Labo is the kind of Nintendo project that comes along every so often and wrongfoots us all – the result of an unswerving internal focus on fresh thinking. As a publisher, it might lean (in some cases rather too heavily) on established brands, but as *Arms* producer Kosuke Yabuki explained in **Edge** 312, Shigeru Miyamoto always asks key staff to consider how the latest entry in a series is truly different from its predecessors. But it goes much further than that, extending to Nintendo's recruitment policy. As Miyamoto recently explained to the New York Times, he prefers applicants with experience and interests outside games. Those with a broader range of passions, he reckons, are more likely to come up with new ideas. Hence the conceptual absurdity of something like Labo.

The more you think about it, however, the more it makes sense. Nintendo has never been the kind of company to follow trends, certainly in hardware terms. So while everyone else talks about 4K and HDR, about augmented and virtual reality, it's no surprise to see it refusing to march in lockstep with its peers, not least since some of its biggest triumphs have been with underpowered tech. It's yet another example of that familiar Gunpei Yokoi maxim – "lateral thinking with withered technology" – and in this case it's an idea rooted in the company's very origins. Nintendo made its name selling pieces of card; from hanafuda to Labo, it's finally come full circle.





The five-in-one Variety Kit and the Robot Kit are joined at launch by a Customisation Set including rolls of tape, stickers and stencils



It's a little more technically advanced, of course. In fact, one of the pleasures of Labo is in seeing how these modest materials combine with the feature set of the Switch itself. There's something quietly magical about the fishing game in the Variety Kit, as a piece of string disappears behind the vertically-oriented display and you see it on screen, moving left and right with your movements, the bait rising and falling as you wind the reel. It's there, too, when you twist the right handlebar of a cardboard motorbike shell and feel the engine revving in your hand as you watch your rider accelerate off the starting grid. The portability of that screen is key: Nintendo is well accustomed to making software and hardware sing together, but at times it almost feels more like Switch was designed for Labo than vice versa.

> Labo is the kind of Nintendo project that comes along every so often and wrongfoots us all

That's partly because this is also the showcase the Joy-Cons have been waiting for: if *1-2 Switch* was the bite-sized entrée, then Labo is the main course. The right Joy-Con's IR camera is the key: slotted into each cardboard shell (or Toy-Con, as Nintendo would have it) it reads reflective stickers, positioned carefully inside to translate to a range of different inputs. The HD rumble feature is used to buzz the Variety Kit's RC car – in truth, it's more of a boxy insect – along flat surfaces. If at first the Joy-Cons seemed expensive for such diminutive controllers, with Labo you really get your money's worth from them.

The Variety Kit is, in essence, the *Wii Sports* of Labo: a friendly, welcoming package to show off its potential, with five different projects to tackle. Toy-Con Piano is an obvious standout, letting you slot in cardboard dials to adjust the sounds produced by the dinky keyboard, as well as record and remix short compositions. The likes of Toy-Con Motorbike and Toy-Con Fishing Rod feel like throwbacks to the era of peripheral-led arcade games: the latter is the more successful of the two, though the former boasts a course editor that uses the IR camera to produce tracks from scanned objects, giving it greater creative potential. Mining the anarchic spirit that birthed WarioWare, Toy-Con House is likely to be a winner with the younger crowd: slotting cranks and buttons into holes in the base and sides produces a range of surprising effects, while its fluffy, big-eyed alien resident is a solid bet for a cameo in the next *Smash Bros*.

At the other end of the scale, in every sense, is the Robot Kit. Taking ▶



Nintendo seems particularly keen to push the musical possibilities of Labo. Alongside the Toy-Con Piano, an early project suggestion is a guitar which uses elastic bands wrapped around the touchscreen to play chords

CREASING UP
For a company that has long prided itself on build quality, Labo is something of a departure from the norm. It won't, at any rate, have been subjected to the kind of stress tests that once saw Iwata ask his staff to drop a DS from a height equivalent to a bicycle's basket onto a concrete floor. The cardboard is both pliable enough to fold without too much force but sufficiently sturdy to comfortably house a tablet and to survive some less than gentle treatment in the short term. Whether it can stand up to the rigours of regular play, particularly where kids are involved, remains to be seen – and there's still some confusion about replacement kits – but from our (limited) time with the hardware it seems typically durable. Still, you'd expect reasonable quality materials for the price – which may, in the end, be a bigger stumbling block. *Wii Sports* sold Wii hardware because it was a great idea, true, but it certainly helped that it was a freebie bundled with the cheapest console on the market. Switch's price hasn't yet fallen, and the cost of the console plus another £60 for the Variety Kit puts it out of impulse-purchase range for most – and potentially out of reach of the very kids who might benefit most from it as an educational tool.

approximately seven hours to build, it comprises a hefty cardboard backpack, with Velcroed hand and foot grips attached by lengths of string to a pulley system within, plus a wearable visor. Never one to waste a dormant idea, Nintendo has built this around the core of Miyamoto's aborted Wii U experiment, *Project Giant Robot*. The object is to smash and stomp everything from skyscrapers to spaceships to earn a high score, with your punches and kicks replicated by the onscreen golem. Flip down the visor and you'll switch to a firstperson perspective; this, combined with the physicality of the controls, makes it feel like the closest we'll get to a Nintendo VR game for a while yet.

It's a compromise that fits the company ethos. Despite some developers' attempts to prove otherwise, VR is an inherently isolating technology, whereas this feels much more inclusive and social. If the Robot Kit is more likely to appeal to Japanese players, it's also the kind of game early adopters will use to demonstrate the capabilities of Labo to friends and family. That, you sense, is a key aim of both packs. As with *Wii Sports*, their limitations feel purposeful: these kits have been deliberately designed not to define the limits of Labo, but to inspire others to go further. This time, however, it's not only for the benefit of other developers.

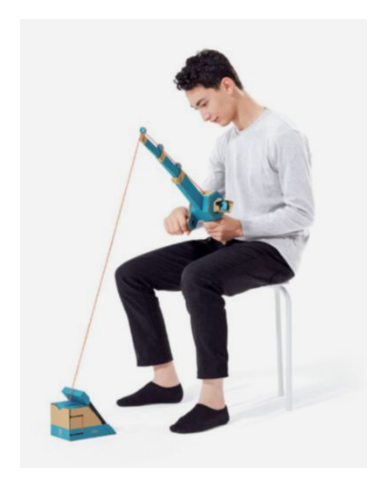
At first, it might not seem like you can go far beyond the electronic instruction manuals. There is, naturally, some pleasure in the process of folding tab A and sliding it into slot B, and eventually producing a miniature piano or a functioning fishing-rod peripheral. But for a while it seemed that the only real way to really make them your own was to use felt-tip pens and stickers as decoration. A couple of months back, our very own Steven Poole suggested this wasn't the creative milestone some had suggested, likening it to putting together a piece of flat-pack furniture: "This isn't really making; it's just assembly". He wasn't wrong: Nintendo simply hadn't shown us Labo's full creative potential at the time.

Now, however, we know differently. With minimal effort, the Toy-Cons can be repurposed. You can use the fishing rod to steer the RC car, or scan fish-shaped cutouts with the Toy-Con Piano to place in a virtual aquarium. Assuming you own enough Joy-Cons, you can use the grips from the Robot Kit to build a homebrew drum kit, strapping one to your foot as a pedal for the kick drum. Or if you've only got the two that come with the Switch, you can make an air guitar with motions to strum and buttons producing different notes. Miyamoto always had high hopes for *Wii Music*: thanks to Labo, its legacy has outlived its initial reputation as a throwaway novelty.

This, potentially, is just the start. Within each Labo pack is a simple programming language found inside what Nintendo's calling Toy-Con Garage – surely a nod to its own internal development programme. This being Nintendo, it's managed to turn a rudimentary form of coding into an irresistibly tactile process: boxes, or nodes, with input and output commands (conditional IFs and consequential THENs) are connected by drawing a line between them on the tablet's touchscreen with your finger. Already, Nintendo has released videos highlighting how you can turn the RC car into a tank, with a stick-figure target to shoot. Here, the IR camera reads a reflective sticker on the figure's head, causing the Joy-Con attached to its back to vibrate, causing the target to fall. It's then a straightforward process to add sound effects: one for when the target is seen, another for when it hits the ground.

> VR is an inherently isolating technology, whereas this feels much more inclusive and social

Naturally, you'll need one of the Labo packs to unlock the Garage, but beyond that you can use your own cardboard and stickers to assemble your own creations. A table tennis minigame akin to the activity in *1-2 Switch* is well within reach; likewise a dispensing machine that releases treats with well-timed button presses. A few spare bits of cardboard come with the Variety Kit, but Nintendo would do well to produce its own equivalent to a bucket of plain Lego. If there are no apparent plans for a separate set that simply provides several sheets of plain cardboard and a few suggested project ideas, customisation packs featuring Nintendo-themed stickers and tape will be available at launch – though, if past form is anything to go by, they may not stay on shelves for long.

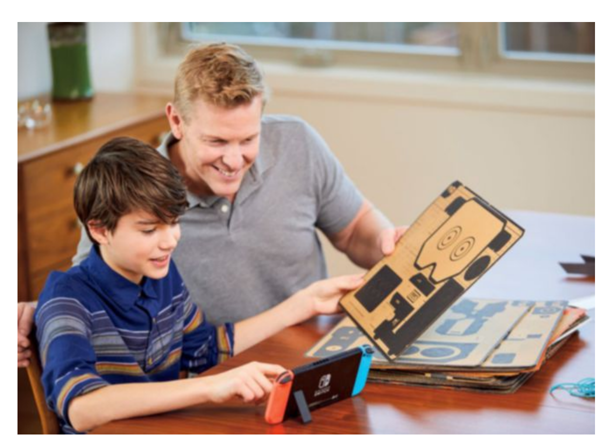


In the fishing minigame you can land smaller fish to act as bait in order to hook something bigger

It may be playful in its conception and design, but you can be sure Nintendo will aggressively push the educational potential of Labo: hands-on events have so far been either limited to mainstream outlets or press with kids. But then, after a year of pushing its biggest names to keep the company's most fanatical followers happy, this is its shot at capturing a wider kind of attention. Labo represents a logical continuation of the blue-ocean strategy of the Wii era, offering an authentically new kind of play experience that should broaden the appeal of Switch beyond the loyalists. It's this, rather than a new *Mario* and *Zelda*, that seems likely to attract a new generation of Nintendo fans – including, perhaps, the kids who've grown up with tablets and been inspired to create and share by the likes of *Minecraft* and *Roblox*. In that light, Labo could prove as important to Switch's longevity, if not more so, than *Super Mario Odyssey* and *Breath Of The Wild*. This silly idea might yet be its maker's smartest in some time. ■

The motorbike peripheral is better than the game it houses, but surely we'll be able to use it as an alternate controller for *Mario Kart* and other racers





Multiplayer modes are available for those with deep pockets. An RC car battle requires two Joy-Cons for each model, though it uses only a single screen. Two Robot Kit owners, meanwhile, can engage in simple one-on-one battles on the TV



Independent living

Inside Nintendo's drive to recruit indies without over-saturating its marketplace

Come January 2019, 12 years after its launch, the server switch for the Wii Shop Channel, Nintendo's first attempt at establishing a digital shopfront for indie games, will be flicked, and the shop will fizzle from existence. It is less of a loss than you might imagine. The Wii Shop's shelves are relatively sparse: Nintendo has lagged far behind its contemporary rivals when it comes to courting and keeping indie talent. For a few golden years between 2008 and 2013 scores of game-makers, through an indefinable combination of luck and talent, made their fortunes with indie titles. None did so, however, thanks to Nintendo and its afterthought of a digital storefront.

However, Switch, that diminutively disruptive force of nature, has changed all of that. While the shelves of Sony and Microsoft's mature digital stores sag under the weight of so many games, players are increasingly attracted to the Switch's eShop for its favourable signal-to-noise ratio. For indie developers, meanwhile, the Switch, with its vast audience desperate for games to play between EPD titans, offers the best hope of their game being noticed in the indie swamp that is 2018. "There are just so many games on Steam," says **Martin Brouard**, co-founder of the Montreal-based studio Sabotage, whose debut release, *The Messenger*, will come first to Nintendo's console. "But because it's a step harder to release on Switch, there's a natural barrier, which in turn makes discoverability easier."

> "If Nintendo hand-picks titles that it believes in, it's a big boon for a studio"

The Messenger is one of a dozen or so indie games that Nintendo hosted at a so-called 'Nindie' showcase at the Game Developers Conference in San Francisco. The event had a dual purpose: to show off some of the most promising games coming to Switch. And, perhaps more importantly, to demonstrate to other indie studios the company's strong commitment to nurturing relationships. "We've been working hard, hitting up different game events, visiting developer conferences," says **Damon Baker**, Nintendo of America's senior manager for publisher and developer relations, whose role is like that of a record company A&R manager, scouting talent and making new signings. Baker and his team have been looking for games that are "a perfect fit" for Switch, namely those that "tap into the flexibility of being able to play the way you want to play, either on the go or at home." While there is no "tried and tested checklist", Baker admits that, right now, games that can make use of the Switch's ease of local multiplayer make for the most attractive signings.

Navigating success with a digital game store is a difficult business, and cautionary tales abound. Both Steam and the App Store were once attractive, fertile grounds for indie upstarts. Today, both platforms are dense, near-impenetrable jungles of content. While Nintendo is hungrily looking for new talent to work with, there isn't a "rush to zero in terms of pricing or getting content out," Baker insists. "We don't want to flood the shop with too many games." After all, Nintendo has first-hand experience of the risks associated with oversaturation; it gave us the Seal Of Quality, after all.

While there is no contemporary equivalent of Nintendo's 8bit kitemark, any indie hoping to sell their game on the eShop must clear a major barrier first, submitting design documents to Nintendo before they're allowed through the door. "Everyone has to pitch their way into the dev portal in order to access devkits, white papers and forms," Baker tells us. "Then we have a certification process that ensures these games are a positive reflection on the hardware itself."

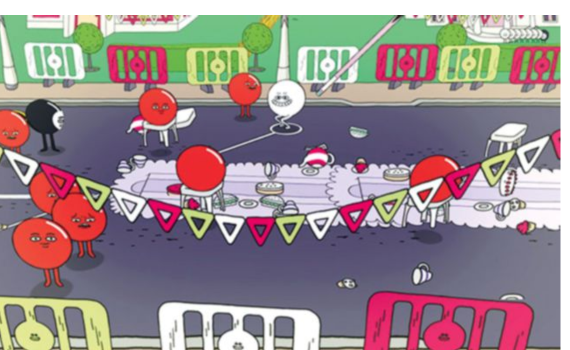

Damon Baker, senior manager for publisher and developer relations at Nintendo of America

According to Brouard, the work doesn't stop once you're inside the ecosystem; he believes that fostering a close relationship with Nintendo is the key to getting your game noticed. "If Nintendo hand-picks titles that it believes in, it's a big boon for a studio," he says. "If it tweets about the game, features us in its booth at shows, it all helps. It's all about having a good relationship, in order to improve your chances of getting a good spot on the eShop. Shelf space, even in digital, is difficult."

In Switch's first year, indie games enjoyed something of a meritocracy, with the best titles rising to the top. As the library expands, however, it's harder to reward games based purely on merit. Nintendo has experimented with a temporary user-rating system (currently revoked) and Baker won't promise that the company will not offer premier shelf space to publishers willing to pay for it. "We don't have an official policy at this point," he says. But after a decade of somewhat lacklustre indie support, and a rudimentary online shopping experience for consumers, there appears to be a systemic effort to do better. "We still have a lot of work in store to make sure people can navigate the eShop effectively," Baker says. "We have to enable people to find what's right for them, and ensure that the cream is rising to the top." ■



Foreknowledge does little to blunt the impact of *The Messenger*'s mid-point reveal when the game switches from 8- to 16bit-style graphics





More 'Nindie' Switch action coming soon: Rekim's *Pool Panic* (left), Tetsuya Mizuguchi's trance-inducing puzzle game *Lumines Remastered* (above) and Asymmetric's *West Of Loathing* (below)



Bomb Chicken reimagines *Bomberman* as a side-scrolling platformer, where the explosives can be laid to provide your chicken with temporary access to higher ledges



PICK ME, PICK ME

Secrets aren't always best kept when you want attention



It's particularly hard for a game like *The Messenger*, a tribute to the 2D pixel-art platformers of the early 1990s, to stand out. "There are lots of games out there in this retro vein," Brouard acknowledges. In order to attract attention, the team at Sabotage decided to spoil a surprise. "A few hours in, the game turns from 8bit to 16bit style, from a platform game to a Metroidvania," he explains. "Ideally, we would have liked to have keep that a secret. But it was worth spoiling one of the surprises if it would help get us noticed."

The undivided

A superstar team of former Ubisoft developers is building something big

You've heard the tale countless times: of a band of veteran developers tiring of the big-budget, mega-publisher grind and deciding to strike out on their own. Yet rarely does the resulting startup come with quite the pedigree of Sharkmob. This is a supergroup, comprising much of the senior team that made *Tom Clancy's The Division* at Ubisoft Massive – its executive producer and creative director, its head of comms, the engineer who spearheaded the making of the Snowdrop engine and the art director who brought it to life, among others.

This was no mass walkout, we're told – rather, CEO **Fredrik Rundqvist** felt it was time for a change, and his former colleagues joined up one by one. Again, it's a common story: with work on *The Division* complete and thoughts turning to the now-confirmed sequel, Rundqvist saw himself staring down the barrel of another long project – and one which, as executive producer, he didn't feel he had enough creative involvement in.

"If you work on a game with hundreds of people," he tells us, "you are no longer making a game on a daily basis; you are managing other people who are making a game. I think that was one of the biggest motivators for me, to actually *make a game* again, and be part of all those wonderful meetings, processes and decisions. If you're in a very high position you can never convey a true sense of ownership, or control, or influence. You can only try to manage it."

He certainly has that control now, heading up a team of almost 40 staff making Sharkmob's first game. Rundqvist and co spent long enough at Ubisoft not to give too much away about the game this early, but the studio has secured the rights to what he calls a "cult IP", which he believes offers an invaluable head start for a company that is just starting out – and a decision which, you suspect, has been influenced by Massive's time spent building a world for *The Division*.

"Generally, people dream of creating their own IP. I'm not sure that's our dream any more," he says. "If you find the right IP, there's so much you get for free: it's something you can immediately rally around, you can hire new people, you can talk to partners about it. It saves a lot of time. And for PR and marketing, how you communicate a brand-new IP is quite a burden, even for big publishers. For a new company, if you have the opportunity, and the money to pay for it, it's the right thing to do."

"It needs to look interesting when you share it. That's increasingly how people consume games"

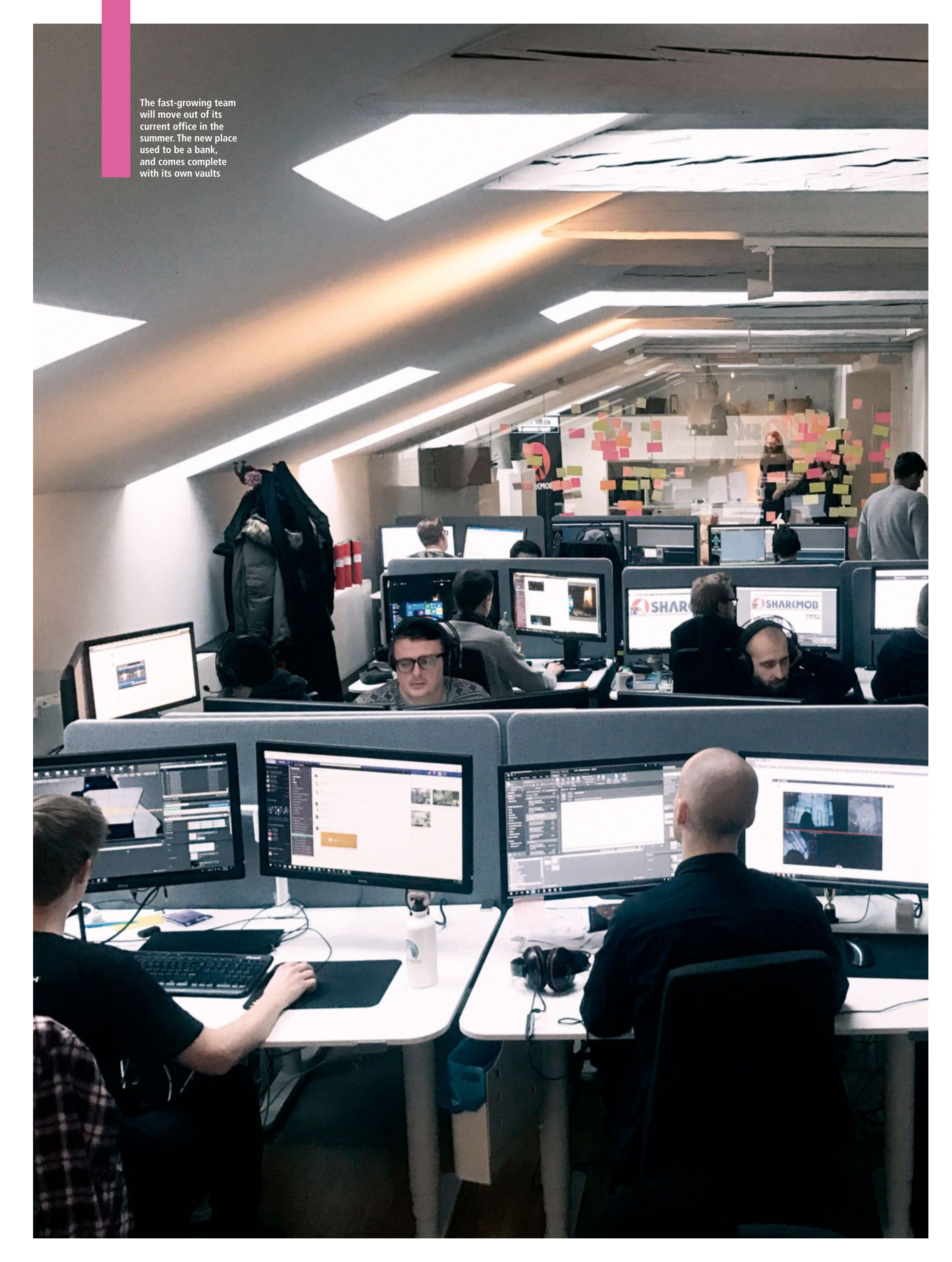
Rundqvist sees this, and other decisions, as being driven by a broader desire to focus firmly on the game itself. If you quit your job because you want to make a game, why spend two years in pre-production on world building? To similar ends, Sharkmob is working in Unreal Engine – a surprise, perhaps, given the technical expertise at the studio. "We have one of the best technical directors in the industry," Rundqvist says, "but we're not here to make a game engine." That feels rather un-Scandinavian, given the pride the region tends to take in its tech. "A lot of that has to do with… it's not necessarily about doing it yourself, but you want really good tools," says communications and IP director **Martin Hultberg**. "One way to do that historically has been to build an engine, hire the engineers and all the people you need to do what you need. But when there's an off-the-shelf solution that does all that for you, why reinvent the wheel?"



SOURCE CODE
Sharkmob currently employs nearly 40 fulltime staff, and CEO Fredrik Rundqvist thinks its headcount should have an upper limit of around 100 ("It's big enough to have its own punch, but still small enough for you to know everybody"). Yet that figure is already being bolstered significantly by an outsourcing network which, he says, has never been so skilled, or so available. "Right now it's not 30-something people working on our game; it's twice that number, but they're not employees sitting in Malmo. As long as you make sure you control the core of the game, and are really good at directing what you need, you can scale up and down much more easily than in the past."

Rundqvist believes Unreal is going from strength to strength, with Epic's stunning success with *Fortnite* unearthing improvements to its engine that the company will soon be sharing with thirdparties – and his excitement at that prospect tells us a little more about Sharkmob's debut. "The kind of game we're interested in making is, luckily, where everything is going. You need something that is very social, very much multiplayer – it needs to be competitive; you need to be able to help each other and find new friends. It needs to be a game that looks good and interesting when you share it, because that's increasingly how people consume games. There needs to be infinite replay value, so everything is its own story."

This might not be a new story, but rarely has it been told so convincingly. With a superstar team, a skilled network of freelancers and contractors (see 'Source code'), and the studio's decision-making focused squarely on what's best for the game it's making, this is more than just another tale of a gang of wizened veterans making a break for it. Though there's an element of that too, of course. When Rundqvist sat at his desk at Ubisoft and considered the next project, he wasn't just looking at four or five years of developing it; he was looking at another two or three of post-launch support too, as publishers and players alike seek to wring more time from every dollar they spend. "I turned 47 last week," he says. "You start to realise there's a limited number of games left in you. I want to make sure I spend those years making the right game." ■



The fast-growing team will move out of its current office in the summer. The new place used to be a bank, and comes complete with its own vaults



PITY PARTY

Armageddon is a time for reflection and hors d'oeuvres

The pastel crayon lines of *Small Talk* belie an oddly genteel approach to the apocalypse: just because the world is ending doesn't mean we can't be civilised. Pale Room's party simulator introduces you to a variety of fantastical guests who open up to you about their lives, hopes and dreams over drinks and chit-chat.

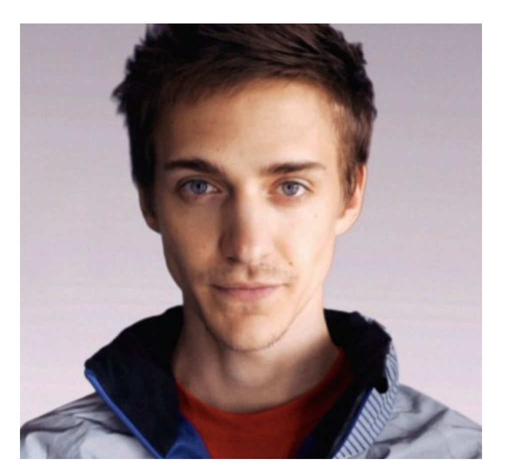
"I like using items and shapes from day-to-day life, and adding enough of a twist to create something unimaginable," game designer and artist **Gabrielle Genevieve** says of her bizarre cast of characters. Get to know them, and you're pitched into their psyches to explore beautiful visions of imagination and insecurities. "When the apocalypse is usually invoked in games, it has a strong survival aspect to it," Genevieve says. "Here, it's more of an irritation, a cause for reflection, or maybe even a relief." Expect your invitation to the party at the end of this year, when *Small Talk* arrives on PC and Mac. ■



Genevieve is predominantly a 2D artist, but with *Small Talk* she "wanted the immediacy of a firstperson perspective, and the flexibility of animating emotive characters using flat drawings"

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"All the kids out there, you can't just drop everything and focus on **playing videogames for a living**. You want to make sure you're securing your future."

Fortnite streamer – and friend of Drake – **Tyler 'Ninja' Blevins** speaks with the easy authority of someone making $500k a month. Yes, we're just jealous



"There's **a lot of design and tech work** to get us to [a battle royale mode] and not just feel like a me-too game."

Jeff Kaplan plays down speculation that *Overwatch* will get on the BR hype train. The rest of the industry may not be quite so considered



"I'm not really confident my next games are going to be hits. **I don't think popularity lasts forever**. So you've got to make as much money as you can, while you can."

Maybe, *Nier: Automata* director **Yoko Taro**. But it's been nearly 25 years, and we're still here. And skint

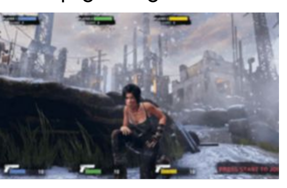
"I love my country. I was supposed to speak about my efforts with the community, how I wanted the local industry to grow, and what we can show to the world. **But I can't**."



Filipino gamedev **Gwendelyn Foster**, one of many to be denied a trip to this year's GDC by the US's increasingly absurd immigration policy

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Tomb Raider Arcade
Manufacturer Adrenaline Amusements

Casual observers would be forgiven for thinking that Eugene Jarvis' Raw Thrills was the last company to be truly flying the coin-op flag, but Adrenaline Amusements would beg to differ. The Quebec company is on something of a flyer at the moment, working at frightening pace with some of the biggest names around. It's made *Rabbids Hollywood* for Ubisoft, and is the studio behind a surprise new *Rampage* release, a tie-in to the new Dwayne Johnson film. If you're spotting a certain cinematic theme there, well done: it's also responsible for *Tomb Raider Arcade*, which went on limited release alongside Lara Croft's latest assault on the silver screen.

That required some concessions, admittedly – the game that rolled out across US chain Dave & Busters had only a single level. A wider release sees the game expanded to four stages, on which up to four players can join forces, blasting targets on a 120-inch display. Yes, this is a lightgun game; while *Tomb Raider Arcade* has a contemporary veneer thanks to assets borrowed (and then scaled down) from Crystal Dynamics' recent work, in design terms this is more 1988 than 2018. Targets pop out of cover and stand stock-still for two seconds before shooting at you; occasionally the action will slow to a crawl for you to shoot troublesome debris out of the way. Nice as it might be to finally see Croft in the arcade, you'll likely end your time with it wishing you hadn't bothered. Which, in fairness, makes it a pretty good movie tie-in.

My Favourite Game
Cissy Jones

The BAFTA-winning voice actor on changing careers, inclusive storytelling, and playing games without thumbs

Cissy Jones is a voice actor for videogames. While perhaps best known for her BAFTA-winning role as Delilah in *Firewatch*, she's also been cast in Telltale's The Walking Dead adaptation, the *Dishonored* series, and *Life Is Strange*, in which she voiced Chloe Price's waitress mother, Joyce. A former Silicon Valley operative, here she tells us how she moved from the boardroom to the sound booth.

How did you get into voice acting?
I used to work in corporate in Silicon Valley for ten years – venture capital firms, startup companies – and I hated it. I just always felt like there was something else out there. Then I was listening to the radio one morning and I heard Nancy Cartwright [the voice of Bart Simpson] talking about what a great job voiceover was. She mentioned a nearby school, and I started taking classes that week. Two years later, I was able to get out of corporate!

Did you always intend to work in games specifically?
I'd always been intrigued by cartoons in particular. But the first time I was really aware of voice acting in videogames was watching a cutscene from the first *Uncharted*. I was like, 'What is this? This is a movie – I thought we were playing a game?' I mean, Nolan North is remarkable. And that's when I really started paying attention. As it went on, *The Last Of Us*, *Assassin's Creed*… just all these super-interesting performances coming out of something that used to be just *The Oregon Trail*. I find it fascinating.

VOCAL SUPPORT
Jones was caught up in the voice actors' strike that began in October 2016 and lasted almost a year. While pay was a factor, so were working conditions, in particular vocal stress and transparency on often-confidential projects. "I've done sessions where I've left and my throat was bleeding and I wasn't able to do my commercial session right after, which is my bread and butter. It's about making sure there's safety precautions in place," Jones says. While not every demand has been resolved, it's certainly progress for one of the game industry's most vital professions.



What's your earliest gaming memory?
It's probably *King's Quest*, which we used to play on the PC with my dad. But I remember learning to play *Super Mario Bros* on the NES, though with the old pads I learned to play like this [gestures using fingers instead of thumbs with pad placed on a surface], so I could run really fast and jump without taking my finger off the run button. Most people look at me like I'm some sort of alien when I say that I used it play with my finger and forefinger, but I did [laughs]. So when the new controllers came out and it was all about thumbs, I couldn't figure it out.

Have you worked it out since?
If I'm totally honest, I'm a terrible gamer. I'll watch a lot of playthroughs, or I'll watch my friends play, and if it's an adventure-based thing, we'll talk about choices before moving on to the next scene. I really like to see what's happening in games. I love to see what other performers are doing, I love to see what stories are happening, especially what's being included.

> "I was listening to the radio and I heard Nancy Cartwright talking about what a great job voiceover was"

A lot of BAFTA performance awards have gone to women in the past few years, including yourself. Is that a good sign for female characters in games?
I think the conversations are starting. We can have strong women; we can have enigmatic women; they don't have to be the princess that needs to be saved; they don't have to be the prostitute, which I played in *GTAV*. You're starting to see more nuanced characters – we're being given more dimensions.

Was that part of the appeal of playing Delilah, that she has all these dimensions but you actually never know what she looks like?
I think it's my favourite aspect of the game, because she's not boxed in, and the player's not boxed in on how they feel about her based on how she looks. It's so easy to forge a love interest by making the character attractive, right? But if you don't have that part of the equation, then you have to figure out how you feel about this other person simply based on their personality, their wit, their charm, their sense of humour. I know some people were really frustrated by the ending of that game, and I get it. But I thought it was perfect, because had they made a physical rendition of Delilah, there's no way it would have captured everybody the way that it did without meeting her. I just love it so much.

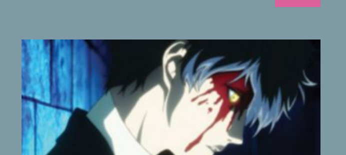
Sounds like that's your favourite game role, but what's your favourite game?
My favourite game that I grew up with is *Bubble Bobble* at the arcade. I loved that game. I don't know why I loved it but it was the only one that I'd play when I went to the arcade and I would pump quarter after quarter, hour after hour into that game. I think part of it was because I didn't have to fight with my brother for the controller and time in front of the television at home. ■



With women winning the Best Performer BAFTA in recent years, some have called for the category to be split, as it is at the Oscars. "But if we're all playing in the same sandbox," Jones asks, "why does it have to be called out that I'm a woman?"

ANIMATION
Persona 5: The Animation
bit.ly/watchp5

If you enjoyed *Persona 5*'s stylish look and soundtrack but didn't fancy pouring a hundred hours of your life into crawling its dungeons, then the new animated adaptation is for you. *Persona* game openings are notoriously slow, but this first episode gets the story going quickly. Indeed, we're at Kamoshida's palace by the end, where a hair-raising 'awakening' sequence for our protagonist comes close to outshining the original. There are nods to the game, including lacklustre recreations of the iconic UI – but subtle additions to key scenes and two new songs are nice extras. The proof will be in the serialised pudding, though: this gang isn't half as likeable as *Persona 4*'s, and we're not sure their personalities will hold up if we're not allowed to specifically choose who we get to know over ramen noodles.





VIDEO
Dev Quest
bit.ly/devquestseries

Join *Hidden Folks* creator Adriaan de Jongh on this world-touring miniseries, in which he quizzes indie studios – Amanita Design, Night School Studio and Kitfox Games among them – about their processes of making weird and wonderful titles. De Jongh himself is a charismatic host, all floppy hair and enthusiasm. He never does seem to get a concrete answer to the question of *why* the devs do the things they do, but the clear and unspoken understanding between him and other indies imparts a genuineness to the affair that a traditional journalist might struggle to achieve.

WEB GAME
Jelly Mario
jellymar.io

Stefan Hedman's *Jelly Mario* is what it sounds like, and then some. Using the arrow keys, you wobble a jellified Jumpman through levels that look classic enough – until you hit an item block and send it shimmying away into the air. Mario himself contracts and compresses as he goes, but explodes into pixel confetti should you try to stomp any Goombas. The way to descend into a lurching pipe is to throw Jelly Mario headlong into it: instead of collecting coins, you bat them around fruitlessly. Even the flagpole at level's end wriggles out of your grasp. It's a hellish perversion of the satisfying platformer, and absolutely brilliant – the best detail being the theme song eerily warping its pitch according to player movement. Let's hope we get a few more levels from Hedman before Nintendo crushes it into dust.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

LAPDESK
Couchmaster Cycon
bit.ly/couchmaster

Nerdytec's Couchmaster Cycon is a premium lapdesk that allows you to use your PC from the comfort of your sofa or bed. While other lapdesks sit on the legs, the Couchmaster is propped up on two foam-filled cushions to keep the weight off and support your forearms. A USB 3.0 hub lets you connect up to four input devices, and the high-quality imitation leather feels premium, as it should – the mid-range Cycon costs around £130, and it's really just a glorified cable router. There's no getting away from the fact that the whole thing looks ridiculous, though, and that's before you start plugging in ostentatious gadgets such as the tablet holder or the 'Nerdytray' (read: ashtray). If you're looking for a comfier or more accessible way to play, and are prepared to bite your tongue when your other half starts calling you Mr Spock, it's worth a look.



continue

Plan BR
Boss Key dumps *Lawbreakers* to release F2P '80s battle royale, *Radical Heights*…

Shanghai boon
Overwatch League's first female player, Geguri, debuts for the Dragons

Rocket science
Fortnite's new rideable, guideable missile opens up fun new strategies

Special addition
Fittingly, **Edge**'s latest appears days before deadline. (Congrats, N!)

quit

X-treme caution
…but the phrase 'X-treme Early Access' might spark a questionable new trend

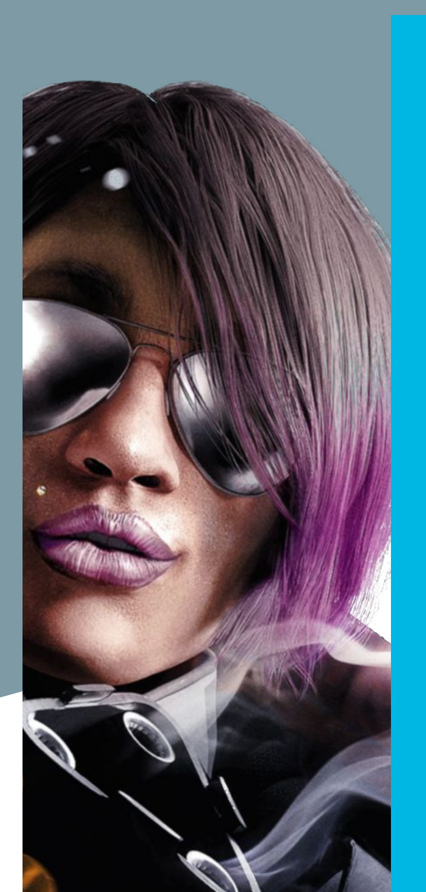
Pros and cons
Racism and sexual assault allegations continue to taint OWL

Fort knocks
A forthcoming item that auto-builds defenses seems like a cop-out

Net loss
Policy changes at Valve sees sales-estimate site Steam Spy shut down



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LAYSTATION

DISPATCHES JUNE



Issue 318

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment



PlayStation Plus

Ode to joy

I was slightly disappointed to read that Steven Poole has written Nintendo Labo off as merely another assembly toy. I don't blame him, mind, because Nintendo has kept the killer feature of Labo somewhat under wraps. That feature? The ability to program the Switch and Joy-Con to make your own creations.

I had the privilege to attend the Nintendo Labo launch event at the London Science Museum with my family in February. In addition to making and decorating our own RC Cars (and even getting one of our creations in the top ten) we had a demonstration of what else was coming.

We got a glimpse of what it must be like to be a game journalist when having the release 'toys' shown to us via carefully orchestrated demonstrations. However, what ignited our imagination was the programming interface. It comprises a simple touchscreen interface that allowed for some pretty intricate programming, allowing you to assign inputs and outputs just like a real programmer. My nine-year-old son's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

Personally, I think this is the most impressive feature of Labo and cannot wait to make the Switch display rude words whenever someone touches my Joy-Con. I do get Steve's point about choice creating paralysing fear, but the possibilities offered by the Labo far surpass mere assembly that I think he described. In fact, I think he did it a disservice and should be made to try to create something with it each month for a year as penance.
Simon Brindle

In fairness to Steven, his column was written before Labo's Garage had been properly unveiled. Given that its eye is on the mainstream it makes sense that Nintendo should have chosen to focus on the kits before the real creative stuff; whatever the thinking behind it, we're glad Labo has legs beyond its cardboard kits.

By the word

I've recently taken on the mantle of occasional PS4 reviews for a small independent site. As a long-term **Edge** reader my prose is naturally flavoured in a similar manner to the reviews I see in your worthy tome every month. It's also nice to see the odd game I've reviewed crop up in these pages, especially when you score in a similar manner. I can now appreciate your efforts month in, month out that much more. Trying to come up with meaningful copy on a game with few redeeming features is hard bloody work! Also I've come to appreciate gaming for gaming's sake rather than outright achievement hunting.
Ian Thompson

"Now I'm a sort-of adult, which means I have time to play games, but not enough of it"

Well done on getting your break in this most enrichingly lucrative of professions, Ian, though calling **Edge** a 'worthy tome' doesn't feel like house style. We prefer 'filthy rag'.

Auto-complete

This letter is an attempt to break a habit. The idea is that if I commit to changing my ways in print, I'll actually have to change them (or die trying?). Specifically, I'd like to return to rationalism. Let me explain.

To be rational, according to a popular definition, is to pursue actions to achieve a goal. If I play games to enjoy myself, then the rational thing to do is to stop playing if I stop enjoying myself. Or, in the words of one overly obsessive man to another: Indiana, let it go. This is rationalism.

Unlike rationalists, completionists have to finish every game, even if they hate it. They come in two sub-types. Soft



www.facebook.com/edgeonline
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers

completionists just have to finish the main campaign. Hard completionists have to see everything: every collectible, map marker, and bit of in-game text.

I started in the 8bit era as a rationalist, mostly because games were just too difficult. I became a hard completionist in my teens, when games were too expensive. I settled into an al dente completionism in my twenties: finish the main stuff, but stay away from pure grind.

Now I'm a sort-of adult, which means that I still have time to play games, but not enough of it to play everything I own. Steam and GOG sales, and subscription services such as Games With Gold have made things worse. But I struggle to quit even when I'm fed up, and the games I do quit continue to niggle at me like unfinished DIY jobs (I'm told that DIY is what adults get up to).

So I'd like to relearn rationalism. I'd like to remember how to quit, uninstall and forget a game when I don't enjoy it.
Leo Tarasov

The need to fill a Play section every four weeks means 'hard completionism' isn't really on the menu around here, but agreed: the games you have to abandon before their time certainly niggle at you for a while. We're certain this PS Plus sub you've just won will definitely help with the problem.

Hate the player

The advent of social media has brought a transparency to the industry which wasn't available when "I were a lad". Modern-day gamers have easy access to discuss games and news with their peers and indeed the developers at will. However, we've recently seen how frustrations can lead to pressure on the industry, ultimately leading to design changes.

EA has recently patched *Battlefront II* with almost a total redesign of progression and unlocks of all characters after huge uproar and anger with gamers. The launch of *Sea Of Thieves* has brought a wave (pun intended) of backlash from players, not happy with struggling servers and lack of launch day content. And a few weeks earlier, Mark Brown's Game Maker's Toolkit YouTube channel released a video about "protecting players from themselves" which again launched to some uproar from viewers.

Are we getting to a point in the industry where large projects can be designed by the committee of angry and vocal gamers? Is it worth getting a dream job working on a big release only for it to be met with a barrage of abuse?

Feedback is a welcome necessity when it comes to the artistic nature of game design, but I'm a bit concerned about this repeating pattern of anger and attitude towards developers. Especially when we see players comparing games' graphical artstyles as a negative. Is there something that we as an industry can do to help (for want of a better word) educate the players into exactly what goes into making a game to help avoid this backlash? Or perhaps it is the publishers' fault in the first place for not listening to player feedback and trying to make a buck?
Bob Makin

We're tempted towards schadenfreude here, since developers and publishers who liked the idea of filtering out a critical press to talk directly to their customers are now realising what that really entails. But it's a grim situation – one developer told us recently that he can't step out to lunch without a barracking. We'd love to say we'd never do that, but we haven't seen Keiji Inafune since *Yaiba*, so who knows.

Hate the game

I don't know about you, but when the world is crap we tend to, as humans, find something to escape into: going to the pub, playing football, or watching films even. Me? I choose videogames. And yet I'm reading reviews of a videogame called *Far Cry 5*, which I am playing and loving at the moment, marking it down for not being political enough.

If you don't know, the main premise of the game is taking down a religious cult who have taken over a state in the US, and you are there to take them down after your fellow police officers are taken by the cult. The setting of the US compared to exotic jungles of the previous entries was something new, something fresh. Whilst I haven't completed the story yet, I've enjoyed every hour so far.

From interviews with the developers, the main point of the main villain is not to be stereotypically just bad, but to comment on the world we live in and maybe make you think twice about the whole endeavour. Something new, something fresh. But in no way be a political statement, more an exploration of life.

What I've seen from reviews of the game is it being marked down for being vague about the issues it tackles, not giving you one central idea or agenda. Now hold on a minute. Don't we use activities like gaming to escape the modern world? And yet it's being marked down for being a piece of entertainment. Why on Earth would anyone want an entire videogame to spoonfeed us a political commentary or agenda?

Shouldn't it be praised for not forcing its agenda or views on us, as that would be just as bad as scrolling through the daily news headlines? Am I wrong that it sat on the fence about issues within the game because it itself is there for us to escape into? To forget about the woes and to dabble in themes in a refreshing way without staying there too long.

Just thought it was a bit hypocritical of these reviewers, that's all. Review games for what they are, not what they aren't.
Charlie Williams

Sure, but it's a game set in the modern world, which pushes that sort of brain-at-the-door escapism off the menu. To purport to have something to say about the world and then saying nothing is worse than just keeping quiet in the first place, no? ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

There's no such thing as freedom of speech, and it's a good thing too. So runs the title of a classic 1992 essay by the American scholar Stanley Fish, which remains evergreen in its relevance to modern arguments about racist cartoons, university no-platforming, and the like. And it comes to mind again when considering a couple of recent examples in which videogames have been refused some market access.

In March, Sony blocked the PS4 release of a game entitled *Super Seducer*, a training game in 'pick-up artistry' (PUA) that, with its dialogue choices combined with live video of poor acting, recalls nothing so much as the glory days of 1990s CD-Rom interactive porn. The mastermind behind it is PUA guru Richard La Ruina, whose own beardy face functions as the player's avatar. Successful choices lead to the beardy seducer appearing flanked by women in their underwear, lolling about on a hotel bed.

In a way, a videogame is the perfect format for this stuff, since the PUA approach is essentially a gamified approach to human interaction. Its adherents are led through an algorithm festooned with if-then statements, a kind of recipe to follow when talking to a woman that aims to take account of all possible ways the encounter – or, shall we say, episode of harassment – might go. Rhetorically, too, the PUA terminology of violent assault – the 'target' to be 'engaged', the 'neg hit', and so on – is of the kind normalised by military-themed videogames for decades. It's just regrettable, of course, that the game is not very likely to function as a successful aid to romantic encounters with the opposite sex. If a man has trouble talking to women, after all, the idea that he simply *needs to play more videogames* is rather counterintuitive to say the least.

Meanwhile, the Video Standards Council recently declined to grant a UK rating to *Omega Labyrinth Z* on the grounds that it "clearly promotes the sexualisation of children", a judgment that is hard to gainsay

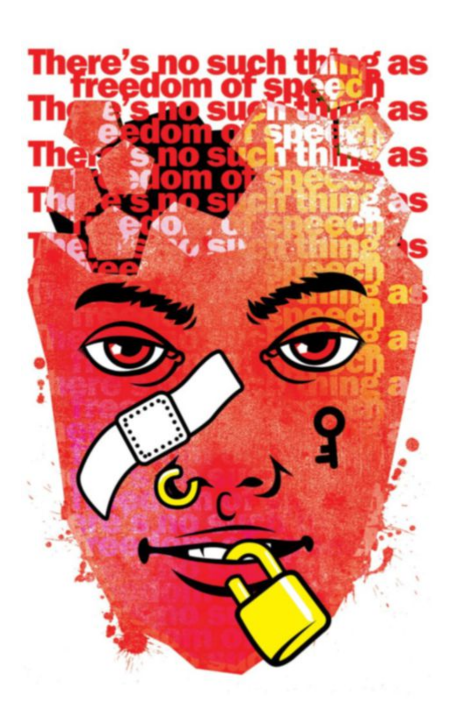


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> If games are a form of speech like other kinds of artistic expression, our discussions about them need to grow up

given that the player is required to stroke the naked bodies of school-age girls. "There is a serious danger that impressionable people, ie children and young people viewing the game, would conclude that the sexual activity represented normal sexual behaviour," said the VSC in its judgment – which could, of course, equally apply to *Super Seducer*.

It would be a perfectly normal liberal response to object to the actions of both Sony and the VSC. After all, there's plenty of PUA 'literature' (such as Neil Strauss's epically depressing The Game) freely available in bookshops, and terabytes of it in text and video form on the Internet, so why should it be particularly objectionable to rework this stuff in the form of a bad videogame? Meanwhile, *Omega Labyrinth Z* is hardly more pernicious than vast quantities of Japanese anime and manga that are accorded a certain edgy geek-cool.

But let's note that there has been no blanket 'banning' or 'censorship' here: *Super Seducer* is freely available on Steam, while the VSC's judgment about *Omega Labyrinth Z* applies only to boxed copies in one country. In any case, no one thinks censorship is always bad. If you think that images of child sexual abuse should not be shown on ITV at 7pm on a Saturday night, then you are in favour of some censorship.

So the argument that Stanley Fish made decades ago is still relevant. He pointed out that, since speech is never 'free' in both possible senses – free of consequences, and free of state intervention – rhetorical appeals to an absolute 'freedom of speech' tend to be anti-political: because they close down the detailed political arguments that should be made about potential restrictions of speech on a case-by-case basis. Fish himself wrote, for instance, that in his opinion "the risk of not attending to hate speech is greater than the risk that by regulating it we will deprive ourselves of valuable voices and insights or slide down the slippery slope toward tyranny". And in practice, today, hate speech is widely regulated – if not by all states, then often by collective action on social media.

Is *Super Seducer* itself a form of hate speech? You might argue so; or you might argue that it should be widely available so that people can see exactly how pernicious its assumptions are. But in neither case will waving abstract notions of 'free speech' or 'censorship' help the argument. If videogames are a form of speech like other kinds of artistic expression, then our discussions about them need to grow up.

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

You can ask me anything about *Fortnite*. I am the *Fortnite* guy. I can tell you all about the guns: that a blue-rarity burst rifle is better than a legendary assault one; that you should drop whatever you're carrying for a bolt-action sniper of any colour; that your prospects of success in the battle-royale arena depend largely on how early you find a pump-action shotgun. I know all about building strategy, too – of how you have to ensure your structure has a sturdy base, of how to look down and then jump to build a ramp beneath you, of how important it is to get a height advantage, and how best to break your fall when it all goes wrong.

I know *Fortnite* inside out. I've got it installed on my Xbox, PC, PS4 and iPhone. I've got well over 100 hours of *Fortnite* experience under my belt, but I'm not getting any better at it. This, I suspect, is because I've never actually played it.

Kraftyy – or realkraftyy, to use his full handle – was a fantastic *Destiny* player on Twitch. Now he's a fantastic *Fortnite* player. He doesn't pull in huge numbers, but he's a very nice chap who is always up and streaming from his Idaho home when it's nearly bedtime in the UK. He's become part of my routine when I'm too tired to play anything myself; I fire up Twitch and watch him for a few rounds. Kraftyy's hook is that he loads into *Fortnite*'s Squads mode, which is designed for teams of four, in a party of one. He rarely wins, but it's consistently thrilling watching someone who's more skilled than I could ever dream of being making life as difficult for himself as possible, and occasionally even coming out on top.

People have, for a while, been telling me that watching games is the new playing them, but I've never really bought it. I knew that *Minecraft*-obsessed kids spent as much time watching other people play as they spent playing it themselves, but assumed it was a consequence of parental control of their screen time. Thanks to *Fortnite*, and to Kraftyy, I'm starting to get it.



Illustration **kaeru.com.ar**

> I know Fornite inside out, but I'm not getting any better at it. This, I suspect, is because I've never actually played it

Kraftyy loves *Fortnite* because of its skill gap – that you can be the best sharpshooter on the planet, but if you don't know how to build, you're not going to win, and when two brilliant builders face off at game's end there is nothing else like it. I, too, love watching *Fortnite* because of its skill gap, but in a different way. I know that getting good – like, *really* good – at the game is going to take hundreds, maybe thousands of hours I don't have. So why not save myself the legwork, and get to share in the thrills of a wonderful, and tremendously watchable, game being played by one of the very best?

This isn't just about Twitch, though – it says a lot about the way games are increasingly being built, pardon the pun. *Fortnite* has been designed to be endlessly replayable, learnable yet different every time, and its central hook, the base building, means its intricacies need a lot more investment to master compared to other shooters. I look at it and can see the workload involved. I recently fell in love, like many of you I'm sure, with *Monster Hunter: World*. But I hit High Rank, and the game changed, and I spent a two-hour session contemplating if I really had the stomach for the hundred-or-so hours the game was clearly setting me up for. This is probably yet another thing for which I can blame *Destiny* and *Puzzle & Dragons*, but when a game starts to feel more like a job than a pastime, these days it puts me off.

I'm not alone in this, I'm sure. And I worry that there's a growing disconnect between what developers and players want from their games. Devs and publishers want us to see their wares as hobbies; to give ourselves over to them night after night until the sequel is ready. We, however, want to play lots of different games, since the industry's output has never been so prolific or varied. Our current piles of shame are bad enough; adding to them with games we need to play for months is a special kind of madness.

Thanks to that, I'm seeing Twitch and, to an extent, YouTube in a far more flattering light. Through platforms that connect us to other, better players with more time on their hands, we can vicariously enjoy the games in which we don't have the time, or the stamina, to fully invest. Streamers and video makers get to turn their expertise into a profession; developers and publishers get to loudly parp about their games' engagement levels, knowing they drive awareness and, to an extent, more sales. And best of all, I get at least a sense of what it's like to land a sniper headshot from halfway across the map.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor. If the rumours of Tilted Towers' demise are true, he's going to start a riot*



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ALEX HUTCHINSON

Hold To Reset

Building a new game, a new studio and a new life from the ground up

What is the purpose of a game conference in 2018? When I first attended one around 2002, they all had pretty clear roles. E3 was a tradeshow directed at retailers and press, where you showed the latest software and tried to get some early coverage on your game. GDC was a show for developers only where you tried to take deep dives into tech and design issues. Gamescom and PAX didn't exist, so there was no real consumer show on either continent; TGS was the one you fantasised about but never managed to go to; and SIGGRAPH was the weird one that you sent your lead graphics engineer to every year but never understood anything about.

Today, most of the conferences have started to bleed into each other, with no clear line between those that are development focused, marketing and PR focused, or consumer focused. It's led to a situation where attendees are split, which was clearly on display this year at GDC in San Francisco. While the conference itself has drifted more junior and student focused over time, the rest of the industry lives in a bizarre parallel world that doesn't even attend the convention centre, and instead lurks in hotel rooms, using the opportunity to meet with potential developers, investors, publishers and other business groups.

We are close to having enough cash to get us to an early-access release in 2019 but we would love to have a more significant, cross-platform launch with a few more juicy features. And so we found ourselves in a tiny room at the Marriott Marquis, asking various business people to please sit comfortably on the edge of a queen-sized bed while we played an early demo of our game.

There are three core piles of money interested in games at the moment. There are the venture capital groups who are looking to buy a chunk of your company early, at as low a price as possible, on the assumption that if they can find a good group of committed devs, then it will pay off in the long run.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

> People seem to have moved on from flavour-of-the-month tech and features. Gone was the obsessive focus on VR

There are project-side investors who are looking to put cash into a specific game for a cut of the sales, and often the opportunity to try and grow the game in other markets or types of media. Then there are traditional publishers, who will provide marketing, localisation, testing and manufacturing support in return for a cut of the revenue.

Thankfully, people seem to have moved on from flavour-of-the-month tech and features this year. Gone was the obsessive focus on VR as the sector's continual failure to make decent games or reach hardware sales targets begins to sink in. There's still a bit of money around, but it's generally being offered by hardware manufacturers looking to prop up a decreasingly valuable investment in the hope that the weather will miraculously change.

Instead, many seem to have refocused on the superficially dull strategy of trying to find reliable developers who want to make something of quality and then sell it to players for money. It's like 1995 all over again, before loot boxes, free-to-play and all the other cunning ways to make money with less effort had polluted the minds of publishers.

The bigger issues now are platforms and price point. Both hardware manufacturers and software publishers are offering varieties of subscription services you can join as well as digital storefronts, and regardless of whether it will stay this way in the future or not, physical retail is still a massive slice of the market. The calculation is how to get enough money to make the best possible game, and gather support on issues such as localisation, testing and distribution, while still keeping enough of a margin that we could make money on the sale.

Our ideal strategy right now would be to launch digitally. As we're a new developer making a new IP, one of our biggest issues will be rising above the noise, so we are planning to keep the whole team on the game for at least six months to a year post-launch, offering a mix of free additions and paid extra content. After that we would love to box up the initial offering, plus all the polish and extra content, and sell it at retail. This will give us the best chance to launch the game, keep improving it, and keep it in the public eye with a chance to sell.

The amazing thing is that this doesn't seem like something that's out of the question. For the first time since we started the company, and for the first time I can remember in all my years in this business, the options available and the publishers in play may make this a realistic goal.

Alex Hutchinson is co-founder of Montreal-based Typhoon Studios. He can be found on Twitter at @BangBangClick

#319

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Jive talkin'

Whoever said 'talk is cheap' must be feeling pretty silly in the age of the narrative adventure game. Telltale Games has cleaned up with its series of Difficult Decision Simulators – the knowledge that even a single word can change everything is a thrilling prospect.

Take *Neo Cab* (p40), for example, in which you play the only human taxi driver left in a world of fully automated vehicles. Creative lead Patrick Ewing has taken his experience creating *Firewatch*'s dialogue system and ran with it, having players encourage passengers to warm to them so they can extract information about a crime, while managing their character's changeable emotional state in order to avoid sabotages of their own efforts. Likewise, *Afterparty* (p44): created by the Telltale alumni and Oxenfree developers at Night School Studio, out-drinking Satan and escaping Hell requires careful social negotiations with both humans and demons – helped or hindered, naturally, by plenty of alcohol.

But while some developers take pains to construct dialogue systems that feel instinctive, requiring a moment's thought and a button-press to unfurl into consequences, others are digging deeper into the complexities of language. *Heaven's Vault* (p52) has you picking your words carefully via the process of translating hieroglyphs to solve the mysteries of archeological sites. It's *Disco Elysium* (p36), however, that intrigues us the most: this gritty cop drama turns discussions with suspects, and even yourself, into an RPG, assigning every esoteric thought, emotion and notion a calculable percentage chance of affecting an interaction's outcome. Whatever happened to a casual cuppa and a chat, hmm?

MOST WANTED

Red Dead Redemption 2
PS4, Xbox One
In the wake of 360 title *Redemption*'s droolworthy 4K upgrade on Xbox One X, we find ourselves fantasising once again about what's in store for the prequel. If we get anything even close to John Marston's first ride into Mexico, Rockstar will have 2018 trussed up like so much cattle.

Rhythm Doctor
Android, iOS, PC, Switch
Here's a scrappy little rhythm game with a solid idea – you must always hit the seventh beat – and some meta surprises in store. With a glut of overpriced, rather dull rhythm games on Switch, we're more than ready for something a bit different.

Starlink: Battle For Atlas
PS4, Switch, Xbox One
A toys-to-life title in 2018 seems optimistic, but Ubisoft Toronto might have every right to be: *Starlink*'s seamless blend of space exploration, dogfighting and modular models looks astonishing so far. We'll have more details soon, so watch this space.



DISCO ELYSIUM

Play a surrealist 1970s police procedural RPG in which you argue with yourself

Developer ZA/UM
Publisher Humble Bundle
Format PC
Origin Estonia, UK
Release 2018

For a cop, there are many ways to investigate a putrefying body hanging from a tree. Close inspection requires the ability to resist the stench, but it might lead to clues that'll reveal the time of death. It's also useful to be able to apply knowledge to recognising the model of the armour the cadaver is wearing on its legs. Then you might get leads on where to investigate next. Perhaps you'll notice the patterns of footprints on the frozen ground underneath. That'll hint at how many people strung the body up, and if you're extra observant, shoe sizes might point towards suspects. But what about the ability to intuit a conversation with the body's spirit? Not an actual ghost, you understand, but an intuition of who this person was. What secrets will you learn then?

Disco Elysium is a police procedural RPG in which your character's skills stretch far beyond the traditional agility, strength, intelligence and wisdom. You'll be using Encyclopaedia to apply knowledge to what you encounter, Empathy to see things from other perspectives, Interfacing to allow you to work with machines, Electrochemicals to help you deal with and utilise the effects of drugs and booze. There are 24 skills in total, spread across four types – Intellect, Psyche, Fysique and Motorics – each profoundly affecting what you can do in *Disco Elysium*'s world and thus how you'll approach its challenges, puzzles and mysteries. This is a peculiarly social RPG, about speech and character and how they affect interactions with NPCs, and a great deal of its dialogue exists within the player character's head as arguments between his skills as they express his deepest motivations and desires.

That player character is a cop. But you don't know that when the game starts with several of your skills, each given a character portrait, discussing the nothingness of his unconsciousness. And then you wake up in a hotel in the city of Revachol, profoundly hungover. The room is trashed, you're wearing nothing but a pair of underpants, and you've no knowledge of who or where you are, or what's happened. It's a premise with a creative approach to amnesia, a strange world and a focus on dialogue that might remind you of *Planescape: Torment*. Indeed, *Disco Elysium* is strongly influenced by Black Isles' 1999 CRPG classic, but it's far more introspective. Your first quests are things such as 'Find the other shoe', 'Find smokes' and 'Find out my name', and it's only when you meet a policeman waiting patiently in the lobby that you find out he's your new partner and you're to investigate a body together.

Disco Elysium's world is woozily familiar, featuring telephones, bars and cars, but it's hard to place, slightly American in some aspects, and perhaps European in others. ▶



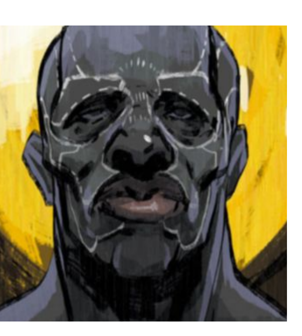
Creative director Robert Kurvitz



At *Disco Elysium*'s outside, the sozzled cop you play as seems barely capable but turns out to be extraordinarily skilled at his job, depending on which skills you choose for him







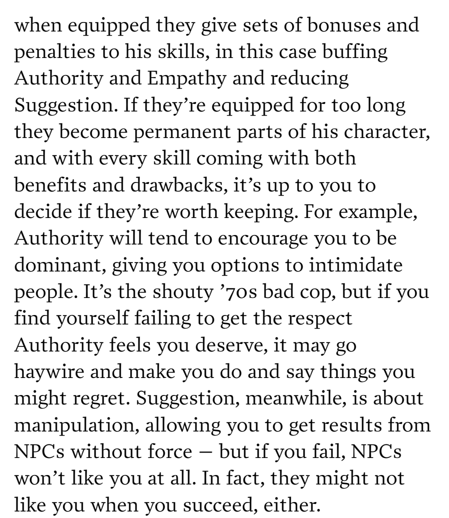
Creative director **Robert Kurvitz** of developer ZA/UM claims it's a first for games ("I'm bold enough to make that statement") because it's pitched as neither an alternative history nor a typical fantasy. "It's this classical Tolkienesque, completely separate reality," he says. "But instead of being in a Victorian or medieval stasis, or a Bronze Age or cyber-future one, this world has reached the technological and political level of something like our world in the '70s."

The advantage of this approach, Kurvitz says, is that *Disco Elysium* can lean on conventions, so players don't need to have all the fundamental mechanics of the world explained to them in reams of turgid exposition. A phone is a phone, and a car is a car. And things in this world will have resonances with real-world ones, but not always with quite the same meaning. At one point, you can choose to tell a recalcitrant barman that you're a feminist in order to extract info on where a female member of staff has gone. "But 'feminist' might mean something else in this world," says Kurvitz. Things are twisted, just slightly, to make *Disco Elysium*'s world worth exploring, but without the need for the game to lecture you about it.

Once you've said you're a feminist, you gain a Thought called Inexplicable Feminist Agenda. Thoughts are part of the character system, notions that occur to the player character as a result of his adventure, and when equipped they give sets of bonuses and penalties to his skills, in this case buffing Authority and Empathy and reducing Suggestion. If they're equipped for too long they become permanent parts of his character, and with every skill coming with both benefits and drawbacks, it's up to you to decide if they're worth keeping. For example, Authority will tend to encourage you to be dominant, giving you options to intimidate people. It's the shouty '70s bad cop, but if you find yourself failing to get the respect Authority feels you deserve, it may go haywire and make you do and say things you might regret. Suggestion, meanwhile, is about manipulation, allowing you to get results from NPCs without force – but if you fail, NPCs won't like you at all. In fact, they might not like you when you succeed, either.

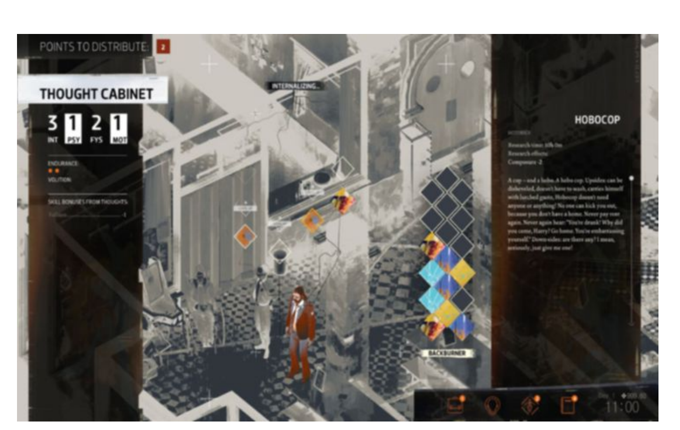
This isn't a game about min-maxing these skills. Instead, it's about the story which emerges from the interplays between them. In many ways, *Disco Elysium* feels like a true pen-and-paper roleplaying game, wild and open but without all the dice-rolling. Yet the rolls are happening, testing against your skills in two ways. First, it's constantly checking against them as you get into conversations, seamlessly gating off choices, opportunities and scenarios when your character's skills aren't high enough to access them. And second, it presents you with active checks, in which you'll be presented with specific choices which will indicate your chance of success and which skills they're being tested against. Failure will usually come with significant consequences, and it's up to you to decide if they're worth the risk.

The result of these systems is the opportunity to play a deep character. The way his skills talk is his stream of consciousness, giving you uncommon insight into what makes him tick as he reacts in this way and



"This world has reached the political level of something like our world in the '70s"





The Thought Cabinet collects notions that have stuck in your head as you play, each giving you bonuses (and penalities) to your skills

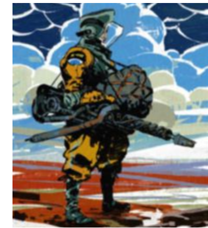




TOP **Revachol is a grimy city of technology and industry which on its surface seems familiar. When you start to look closer, though, a more fantastical side reveals itself.** ABOVE **You're accompanied by Kitsuragi, an efficient fellow cop who plays by the books and yet is surprisingly patient with your odd behaviour.** RIGHT **Combat is played through the same choice system as dialogue and your internal stream of consciousness, and utilises the same sets of skills, which check your hits and misses**

that, sometimes without your direct input but always in line with the character you decided he'd be, whether he's a slick talker, a hardboiled thug or an uncontrollable lush. They're also a large part of the reason why *Disco Elysium* is frequently laugh-out-loud funny and rich in pathos. Something very bad has happened to this character, and the way the early game unfolds, with you discovering the world in step with him, is transfixing.

The game's visual design takes a large part in all of this. Though the specifics play out in the dialogue box, the world helps to craft the atmosphere, drawn in expressionistic slabs of paint, pattern and texture but also able to pick out plenty of fine detail, and all presented from an isometric viewpoint. But despite appearances, it's not flat artwork. Being 3D, it allows you to zoom in and out freely while also enabling lighting effects that send shadows reeling through the city's dark places when you're carrying a torch. It's a style that works tightly with the imagination of its world and the sharply written text, which emerges dynamically from a 600,000-word script. From the experience of touring its first hours, they're combining into a surprising, profound, silly, gross, and vibrant reinvention of a classic form. The prospect of the final game is exciting indeed. ■



Origin story

For a debut game from a new studio, *Disco Elysium* has a long history. First announced back in 2016 as *No Truce With The Furies*, it was a rather smaller game ("a detective novella," Kurvitz describes it as), set in a seaside town. "But then it turned into a fuck-ton of words. Seventy voiced characters, 28 pieces of music. What happened, man! To do the story with the level of juiciness we wanted, we needed to make it big." It moved to the city of Revachol, and its name was changed to reflect – and better sell – its grander ambitions. But *Disco Elysium*'s roots are much older, in a world Kurvitz began building in 2001 for a pen-and-paper RPG, in which he set a novel written in his native Estonian called Sacred And Terrible Air.

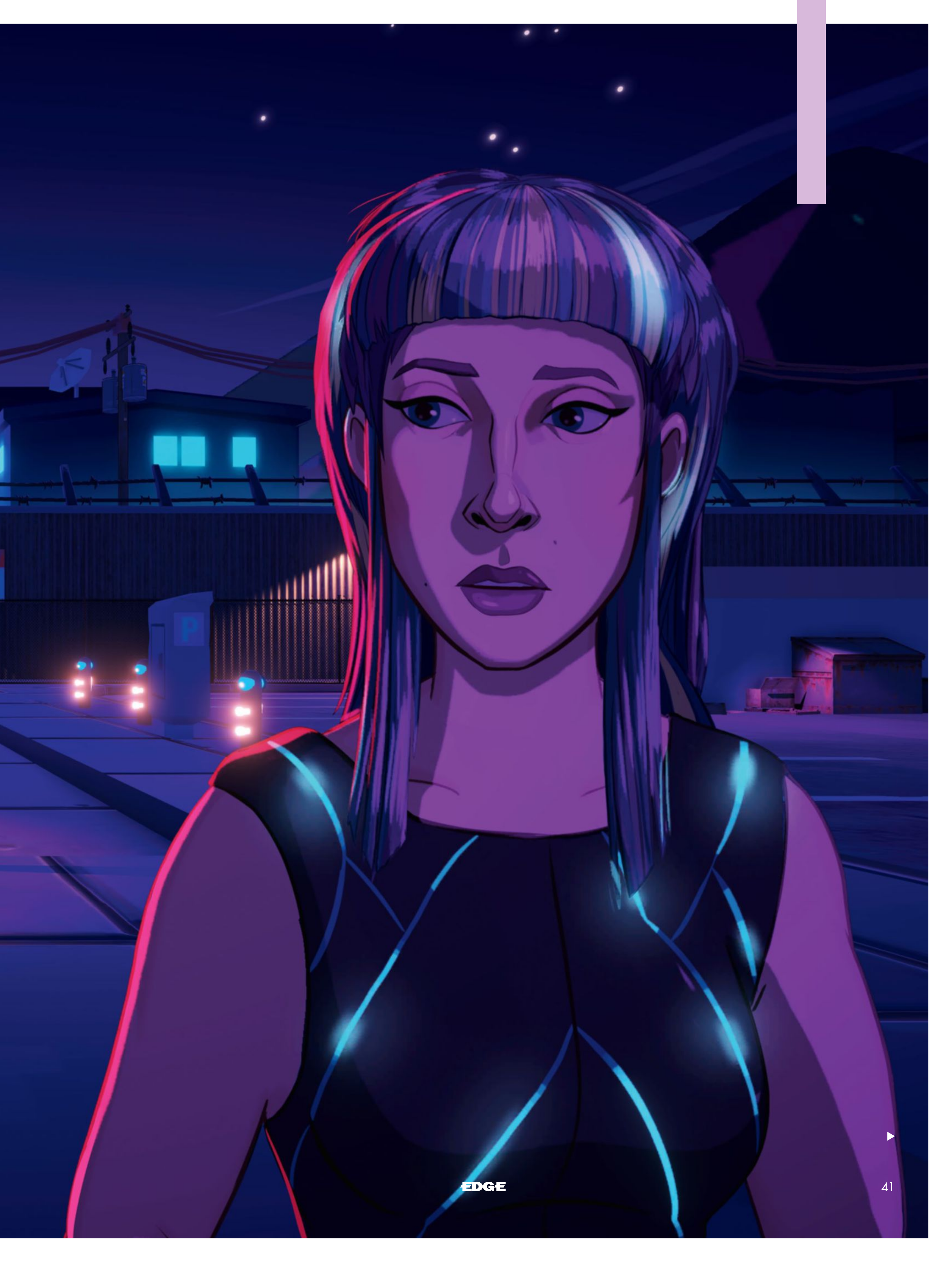


NEO CAB

The drive of your strife

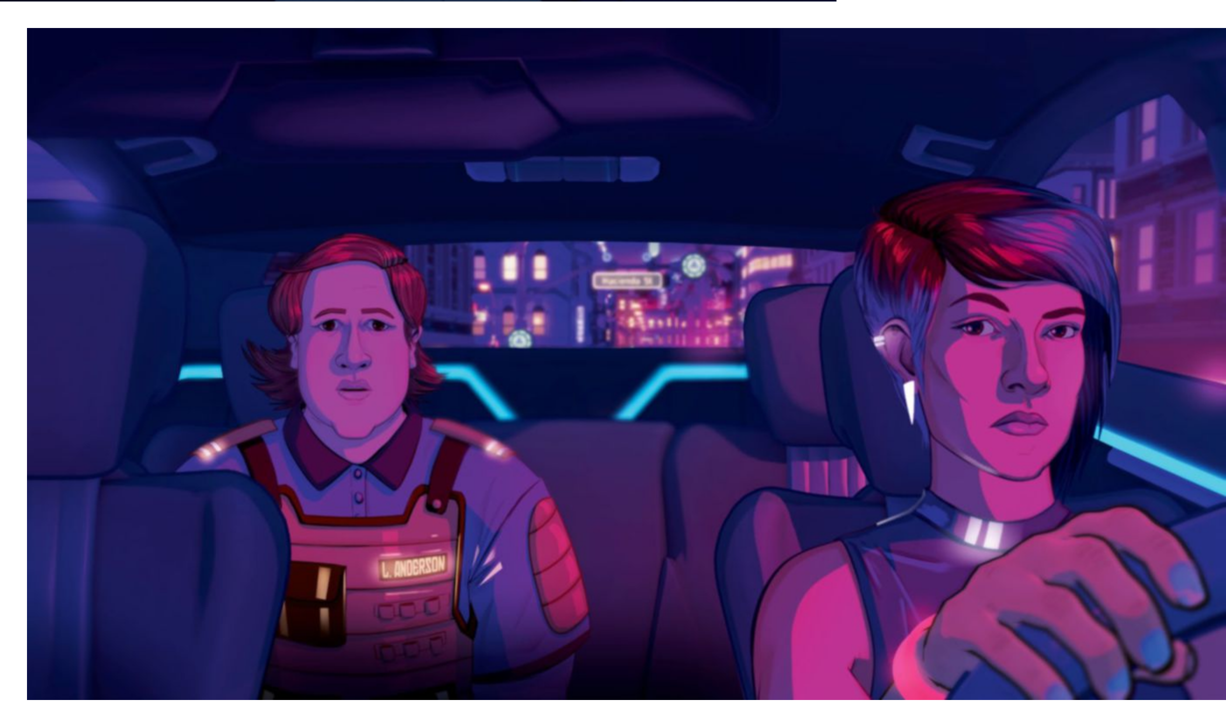
Developer/publisher	Chance Agency
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2019

Protagonist Lina suspects the city's autonomous taxi service may have had something to do with her friend's disappearance. "Los Ojos has an anarchist street-punk wing and a tech-corporate wing, and it seems like she bridged both worlds – so what's the story there?" creative lead Patrick Ewing teases



TOP Outside the Silicon Valley tech scene, Ewing cites ***80 Days*** **and** ***Papers, Please*** **as big influences.**
ABOVE **Customers give information which leads you to specific quests, the completion of which will earn the trust of certain organisations**

TOP **Lina's 'feel grid' is much more than just a health bar, Ewing explains. "You can be worked up and angry, chilled out and relaxed, or chilled out and depressed – it's more of a two-dimensional map that your character can move across."**
ABOVE **The game's colour palette was inspired by photographer Liam Wong and his pictures of Tokyo at night, while art director Vincent Perea is looking to incorporate Mexican-American influences into the general aesthetic.**
RIGHT **You'll need to pay attention to a customer's face. Picking up on emotional shifts should guide your responses – assuming Lina herself is in the right frame of mind, of course**





NEO CAB

As a former web designer who spent five years working for Twitter, **Patrick Ewing** has plenty of first-hand experience of Silicon Valley utopianism – including its dark side. "I think tech is absolutely a force for good in many ways," he tells us. "But Uber was the big example of a company that clearly wanted to get ahead by not playing by the rules. I met the founder, and I knew a lot of investors, and I got this vibe about them that the future they wanted was actually kind of cyberpunk and scary." The company's goal – already underway – of a fleet of entirely autonomous vehicles gave him an idea for a story: what if you were the last human driver in a city of self-driving cars?

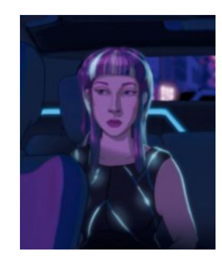
Ewing's Twitter career ended when he decided to join Campo Santo. "I'd been friends with Sean [Vanaman] and Jake [Rodkin] for ages," he says; as soon as he learned they were leaving Telltale, he leapt at the chance to join them. "I knew this team was going to do something amazing and I wanted to help out in any way that I could." Ewing was involved with Firewatch's tools for inputting dialogue and voiceovers, and did some writing on the side ("mostly wayfinding dialogue and stuff like that"), but when Firewatch launched and Campo Santo didn't know what its next project would be, he seized the opportunity to strike out alone with his own idea.

In *Neo Cab*, you play as Lina Romero, "the last and best driver" in the fictional city of Los Ojos, in Baja California, right on the border between the US and Mexico. "It's a hyper-capitalist sort of place," Ewing elaborates. "This cyberpunk-like dystopia, where corporations are in control." Lina's tempted there by a call from an old friend, who encourages her to start a new life in a new city, but when that same friend vanishes shortly afterwards, the protagonist is forced to take a job to make ends meet while investigating the sudden disappearance. Through conversations with her various fares, she gradually unravels the mystery while surviving from star-rating to star-rating.

As any Uber driver will know, getting the full five stars is crucial. Fortunately, Lina is both empathetic and street-savvy: the ideal combination to get customers to both warm to her and to open up, potentially providing leads to follow up as she searches for her missing friend. Ironically, her driving is automated – "basically because there's no way to modulate the tone of the game when you can run into other vehicles and kill pedestrians like in *GTA*" – though you'll have some influence over the route you take. Some streets may be blocked off, for example, while you might not have a permit to pass through certain neighbourhoods. "There's that same feeling that you had in *80 Days* of the map being spatially real but you're never in direct control of the car," Ewing explains. "But sometimes you'll have a choice: do I park here or do I park there? Do I make a left turn or do I make a right turn?"

What if you were the last human driver in a city of self-driving cars?

In the meantime, you'll need to look after yourself. Lina wears a biotech device which mirrors her emotional state, and can potentially affect her interactions with fares. As such, you'll need to carefully consider your responses during conversations, balancing self-care with the needs of your customers. "If your emotional levels go too far in any extreme direction, things can get wonky – like you can no longer drive that night and have to start over the next day," Ewing says. "Or if you get incredibly angry, there's no way that you're going to be chill if some asshole gets into your car and is treating you poorly, right? You're going to fly off the handle and kick him out." Sure, the one-star rating might be a problem, but that's bound to make you feel good. ■

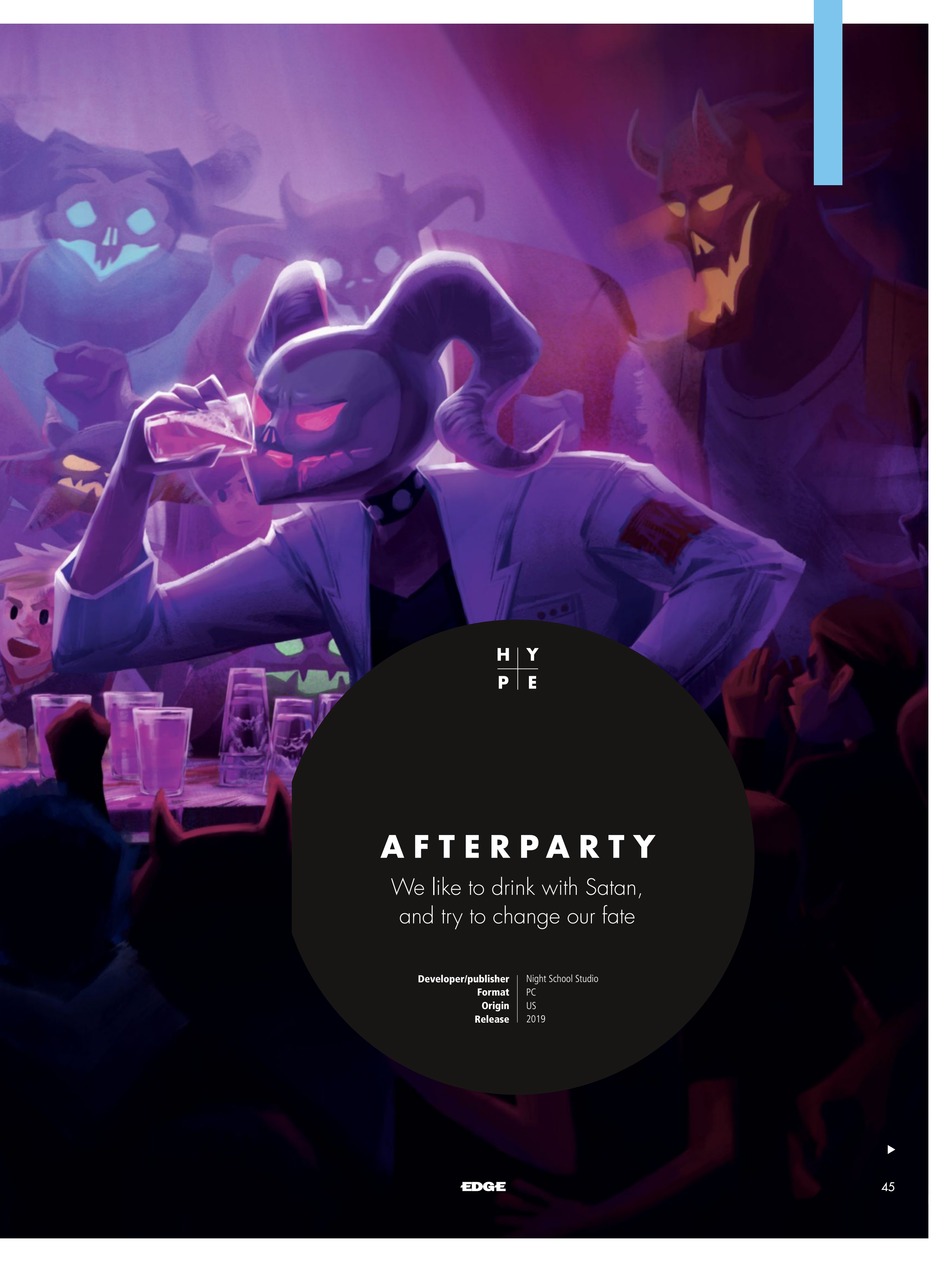


Ride with me

Beyond a few external shots for the sake of environmental storytelling, the camera mostly stays inside the cab. "We currently have seven cinematic camera angles," Ewing says. "They auto-switch now, although we've talked about giving the player control of switching the cameras, too." But he's hoping that by keeping the action confined, he can focus on the human tales that unfold within: Jim Jarmusch's Night On Earth and HBO reality show Taxicab Confessions being the key reference points. "The craziest things came up – one time, there was a woman on the way to kill her boyfriend!" Ewing laughs. "But that was our kick-off. We've assembled this crack team of really great writers, and said to them, 'Okay, anyone can get into the car. Go!'"



The two twentysomethings couldn't be more different. Milo fancies himself as a party guy, and yearns to be cool, while Lola is more naturally sure of herself. They can both handle their liquor, however



AFTERPARTY

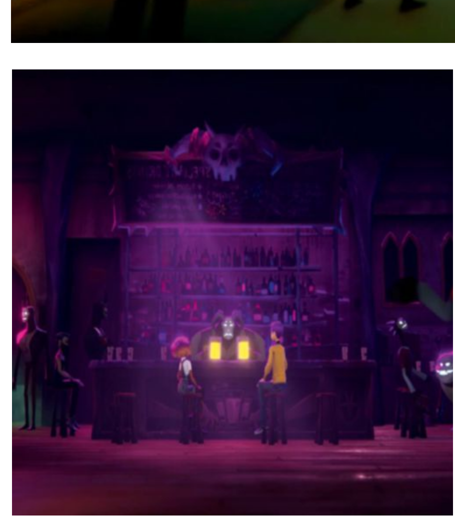
We like to drink with Satan, and try to change our fate

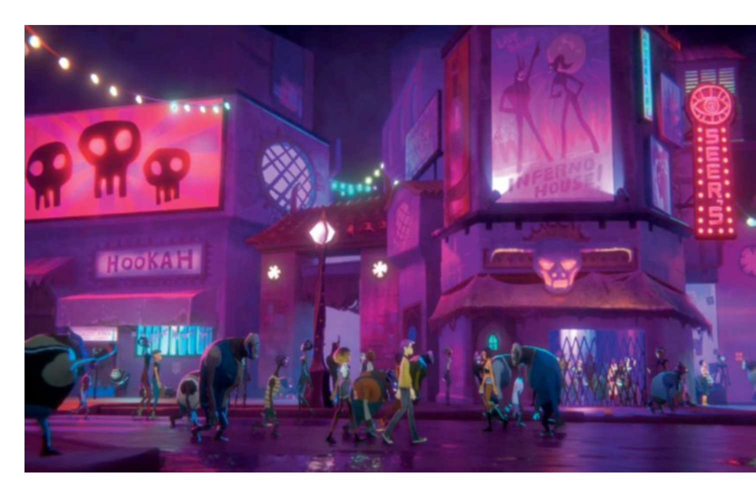
Developer/publisher	Night School Studio
Format	PC
Origin	US
Release	2019





ABOVE **Milo is the one who's responsible for the pair's accidental death. They wind up stuck in Hell right before they were due to finally go their separate ways at different colleges – tensions are bound to surface.**
TOP RIGHT **Far more people replayed *Oxenfree* than expected. *Afterparty*, therefore, has been built with replays in mind: the idea is that you'll want to see parts of Hell you didn't the first time round – and, as in *Oxenfree*, there'll be narrative reasons to return.**
MAIN **Skill-based minigames such as beer pong, karaoke, dancing and arm-wrestling punctuate the bar crawl, and your performance can impact how stories play out. You might not want to bring your A-game when playing against a powerful crime lord, for example.**
BELOW LEFT **Most drinks serve as accompaniments to dialogue choices, but some are more drastic. "There's a *super* special drink that makes the player vomit their conscience up, and the conscience runs away. Then all their dialogue choices are awful!" Krankel laughs.**
BELOW RIGHT **Hell might seem like a chilled-out scene by night, but eagle eyes will spot torture devices that hint at the daytime horrors**









Sean Krankel, Night School Studio co-founder and studio director

Think of the craziest night out you've ever had. Now count yourself lucky that it didn't involve you out-drinking the Devil to barter passage back to the land of the living. Well, unless you were *really* hitting the hard stuff. Spare a thought for poor Milo and Lola, then: after an accident that kills them both, the two childhood friends are banished to the depths of Hell. To escape, they must embark upon a desperate, drunken, demon-infested bar crawl to win back their souls by beating Satan at what he does best – pounding beers, apparently.

It's quite the elevator pitch from Night School, the studio behind supernatural adventure title *Oxenfree*. "We said, 'What is a setting that can have a lot of different people from different walks of life coming through, and a lot of different stories?'" co-founder and studio director **Sean Krankel** recalls. A game based around the DMV was considered, and mercifully set aside. Then, Krankel suggested the idea of a bar. "Then we were like, 'What's the craziest place we could be for the craziest night out?'" Krankel says. "And that led to Hell."

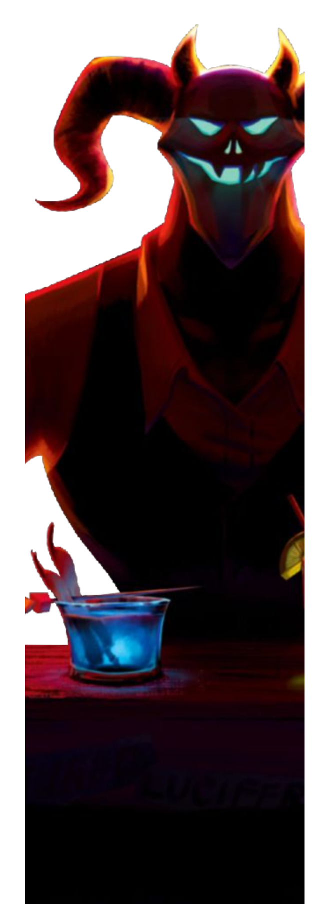
The nightlife in *Afterparty*'s version of Hades is thriving. By night, Hell is a neon-lit strip of pubs and clubs propped up by all manner of intriguing patrons. But by day, things are traditionally grim down under. "People are getting flayed, and tortured," Krankel says. "But, come six o'clock, the whistle blows and it's quittin' time, and demons and humans kind of co-exist: they drink, and commiserate." It's critical that Milo and Lola escape Hell the same night they arrive, then. The time-frame for the adventure was the result of much discussion. "We said, 'One night feels right,'" Krankel says. "It doesn't allow them to stop for too long in any place and settle in. It should feel like Bill And Ted's Excellent Adventure, where they've got to keep going – and they're causing a wake of insanity behind them."

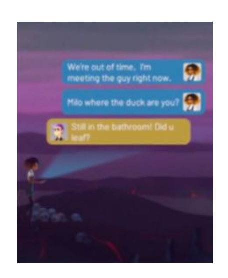
While the single-night time limit and naturalistic conversation system mirrors *Oxenfree*, *Afterparty* is designed to allow its players greater freedom. While Alex and friends' spooky island jaunt was fairly linear, the stakes are higher when exploring Hell. "The story will change pretty dramatically not only based on dialogue choices, but also physical events," Krankel says. "If you go to one bar for a quest, we want that to result in another quest *fully* being cut off – like, another island might sink into lava on the other side of the map."

Adding alcohol into the mix broadens communication options. Regular drinks such as beer and wine grant liquid courage and open up additional dialogue choices, but selecting something more exotic from the menu – say, a Bloody Stool or a Dead Orphan – allows players to more specifically alter dialogue choices. Perhaps a certain bar might call for a flirty approach, or a more aggressive tone, that a particular drink can inspire. "It's not necessarily a lock and key where you're like, 'I must drink exactly the right drink,'" Krankel says. "It's more like, 'How do I want to augment my dialogue choices?" *Oxenfree*'s optional silence, meanwhile, is replaced with a dedicated button to sip your drink – which is, of course, a depletable resource. "You don't want to drink too fast, because you can black out," Krankel says, hinting at a special location that's only accessible when you're absolutely wasted.

> *To escape, they must embark upon a desperate, drunken, demon-infested bar crawl*

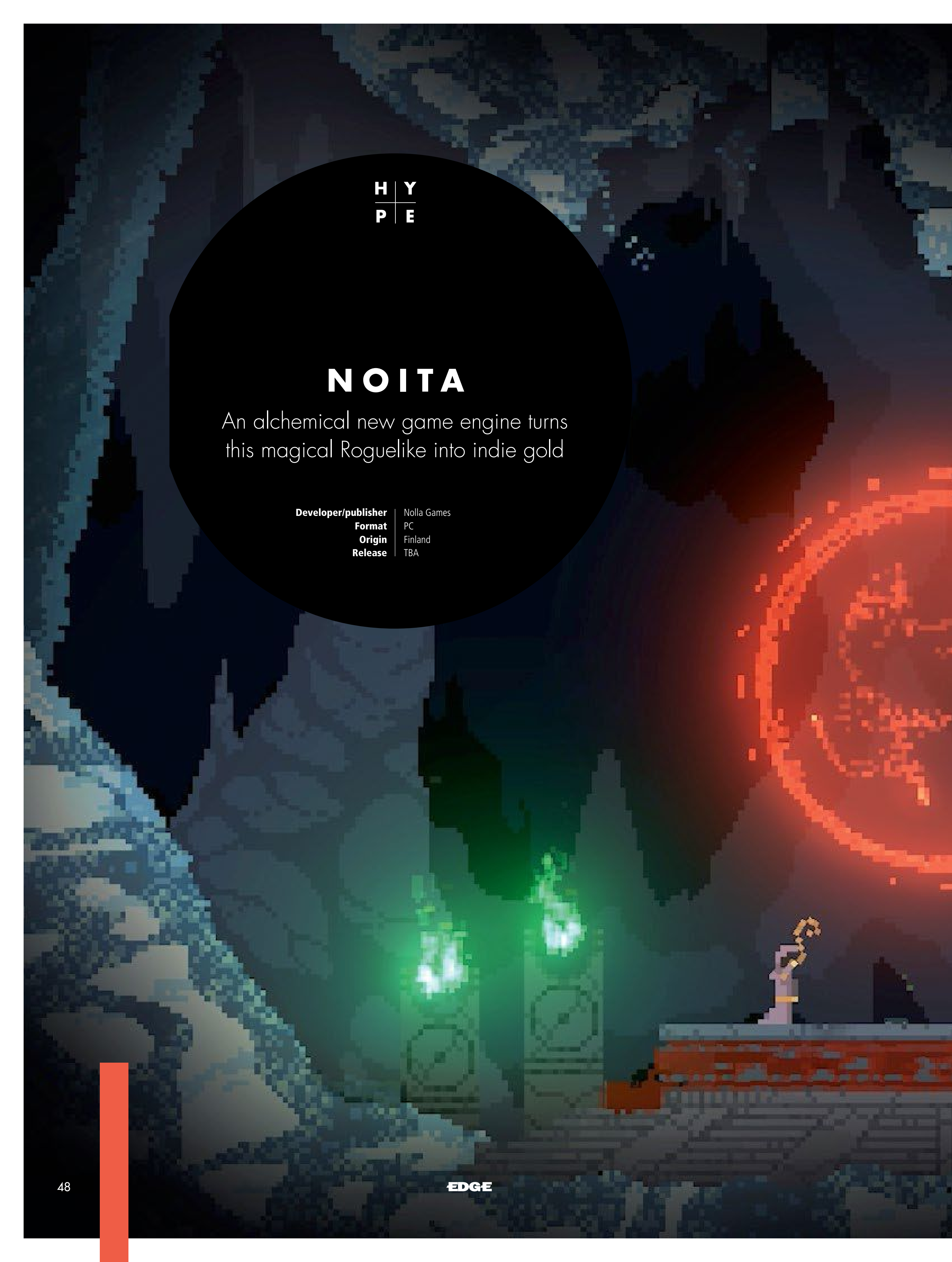
The team are still playing with the idea of introducing a tolerance system: the idea is that when Milo and Lola finally face Satan, they're ready to drink him under the table. "I think there's a lot of fun to be had in that feeling of progress over the course of the night," Krankel says. "I don't want to say RPG mechanics, but if you are unlocking new drinks or off-the-menu drinks, it's a nice progression system other than, 'How far am I into the story?' Bringing in various other mechanics to roleplay with, that are always augmenting the story, was something we wanted players to feel creative with." ■





Social purgatory

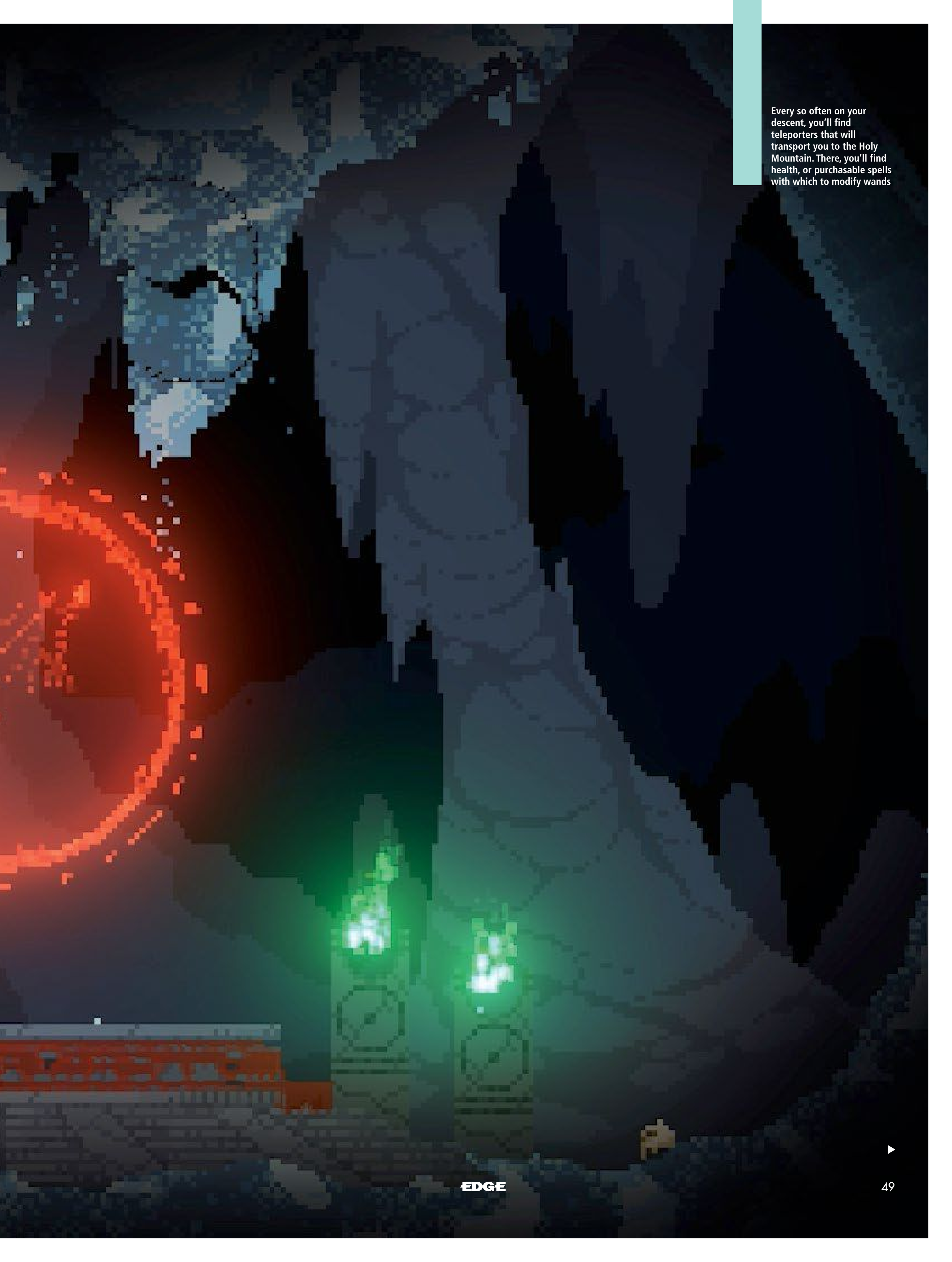
Hell wouldn't be complete without a version of Twitter. *Afterparty*'s social media of choice is called Bicker, and it serves as the visible inner monologue of NPCs. "It's a modified version of the thought bubble from *Oxenfree*," Krankel says, which he admits was perhaps a little bit too opaque to be satisfying to all players. In *Afterparty*, if you trip over in the street, or spill your drink on an imposing demon in a bar, Bicker will spring to life, with hellspawn typing out snarky live commentary. "At the end of the game, the player will be able to look back through a live Bicker feed," Krankel says. "It'll be a totally different timeline to the next person. But the writers are not super thrilled about the amount of stuff they now have to do!"



NOITA

An alchemical new game engine turns this magical Roguelike into indie gold

Developer/publisher	Nolla Games
Format	PC
Origin	Finland
Release	TBA



Every so often on your descent, you'll find teleporters that will transport you to the Holy Mountain. There, you'll find health, or purchasable spells with which to modify wands

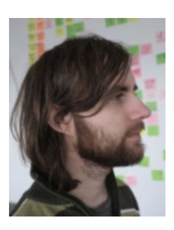
LEFT You can find new wands scattered about the caves, and even alter them by equipping new spells in their slots. Our favourite is the All-Seeing Eye, which lets us peep through walls to spot much-needed health. BELOW This room is filled with potions – some of which can levitate enemies, or turn them into sheep. Here, it's guarded by a tricky fireball-slinging foe

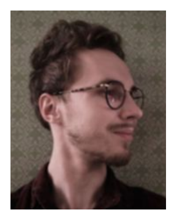
ABOVE An ultra-forgiving hover ability is essential to escaping from deep holes, or dodging projectiles. It sounds like a jetpack; it's a holdover from when *Noita* was a sci-fi god game. RIGHT ***Noita***'s designers are already speedrunning it. Purho's best is just under ten minutes, achieved with the help of a teleporter modifier on a wand. You must visit at least eight areas to 'beat' the game, if you don't count the Holy Mountain rooms





NOITA







FROM TOP **Arvi Teikari, graphics artist; Olli Harjola and Petri Purho, programmers**

There's a reason there are animated GIFs on the website. In a screenshot, *Noita* is pretty, but unremarkable. We've seen plenty of pixel-art Roguelikes, after all: indeed, the art style has become something of a cliché in the indie scene, with many devs starting to actively avoid using it. "Showcasing the game at GDC, I feel like there were some people walking past the game after glancing at the screen – 'Okay, it's a pixel platformer game'," programmer **Olli Harjola** says. "There is a sort of stigma. If they didn't see any of the physics, they'd just walk past." Their loss: *Noita* is mesmeric in motion, with every individual pixel physically simulated.

Blood coats the surface of rippling pools. Fireballs careen into craggy ceilings that crack and fall. Lava potions eat through walls, millimetre by millimetre, and fizzle out at the edges in curls of smoke. It's powered by Nolla Games' custom 'Falling Everything' game engine. Prototyped back in 2012 by programmer Petri Purho, it's a clever combination of two very different systems. "I started with QUICKBasic: with that, you can easily do falling sand," Purho says. "So then the big problem was, 'Can we have rigidbodies with this?' So you have these big parts of a tree that would fall down and keep together." By taking the pixels and generating polygons out of them, Purho created rigidbodies that could be used with Box2D. "It was a huge feat from Petri to get those working together, so we could have those rolling-rocks physics in the world of falling sand," graphics artist **Arvi Teikari** says.

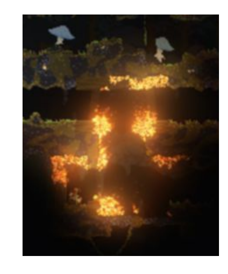
A starting-area tutorial teaches us how to kick objects: we give a minecart a good punt, and it rolls down into the randomly generated cave system – and into an explosive barrel, obliterating its surroundings. This includes a nearby vat of oil, which spills over the still-burning rubble. You can guess what happens next. Soon, we're hunting down potential terraforming potions to set off chain reactions and burrow deeper into the earth. When we mistakenly set ourselves alight, we switch to a bomb-slinging wand and destroy a rockpool overhead to douse ourselves with water. "It was satisfying to show the game off at GDC, because if people stayed, they actually saw the interactions of materials," Teikari says. "One of the funniest reactions was when I mentioned that if you're on fire, it might be a good idea to take a blood bath…"

***Noita* is filled** with magical, mysterious and perfectly physically simulated fluids to play around with in its destructible environments, but it's currently difficult to pull off a truly satisfying run, because it's not always immediately obvious what the pros and cons of certain materials are. The properties of things like radioactive sludge or purple slime are well-hidden behind cluttered UI. "One thing that makes designing the HUD more difficult is the large pixel style, because there's less detail to work with to indicate what something does," Teikari says.

Given *Noita*'s permadeath mechanic, going too crazy with the acid potions starts to feel prohibitively risky once we're a few levels deep. "There's a bit of a tension between how much we should tell the player, and how much we should let them discover these things on their own," Purho says, explaining that you could dilute a large lake of radioactive liquid with a water source. Disappointingly, being soaked in blood doesn't do anything particularly special currently, although our assumption that it attracted more enemies is noted by the team with interest.

Noita is mesmeric in motion, with every individual pixel physically simulated

Indeed, both the details of *Noita*'s gameplay and the very engine it's running on are still very much a work-in-progress – the team are "hoping to be done this decade," Purho says, half-jokingly. Little wonder: *Noita* is so technically demanding that it's currently limited to PC, although Nolla would like to attempt console ports after the team have finished building the game. There are plenty more design mysteries to solve, too, but from what we've played, *Noita* is already a spellbinding prospect. ■

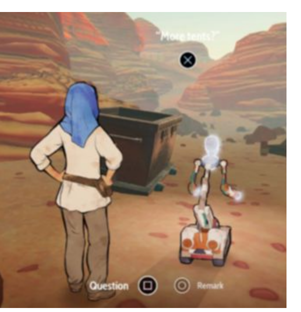


No gods, no masters

Noita was originally a sandbox-style god game. "You weren't controlling an individual character, but you could do spells and morph the landscape," Purho says. "Followers would build houses, animals would attack each other, and it would be a sort of ecosystem." The team found it lacking in direction and purpose – not to mention the trouble they had with deer getting trapped in ditches and drowning in their own urine – and it was repurposed as a Roguelike with a player-controlled character. But aspects of the god game remain in the terraforming tech, and ecosystem: we often hear enemies triggering their own far-off explosions in fights that let us swoop in later to scoop up their gold.



Developer/publisher Inkle
Format iOS, PC, PS4
Origin UK
Release TBC



HEAVEN'S VAULT

This "chatty Uncharted" should give players plenty to talk about

Videogame archaeologists, as Inkle co-founder **Jon Ingold** rightly points out, don't actually do much proper archaeological work. Nathan Drake and Lara Croft might technically investigate ruins, but often that involves shooting people, jumping between conveniently placed handholds and dangling from crumbling masonry while yelling PG-rated curses. A lot of games, he says, invite you to embody characters before giving them tasks that are at odds with their characterisation. "Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* is obviously a badass robot dinosaur hunter, but she spends a lot of time picking flowers," Ingold tells us. "As game players we accept it, but as a designer it's really hard to build that game and not feel faintly embarrassed about what you're doing."

Here's the twist: you won't immediately know if you're right or wrong

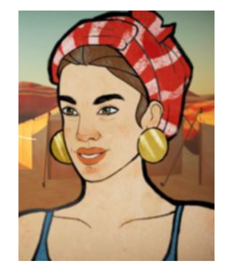
A studio such as Inkle, for which narrative is especially important, always wants the player's activities to cleave closely to what feels natural for its central characters. That handily explains all the luggage-rearranging business in the excellent *80 Days*, and why here, as protagonist Aliya Elasra, we're asked to spend time deciphering hieroglyphics. It's not quite as tricky as the real thing: the studio's other founder, Joseph Humfrey, calls it "the *Guitar Hero* of linguistics" in the sense that it offers an approximation that feels close enough without the years of extensive study. But we've become accustomed to this kind of donkey work having been done for us: Drake alone relies on clues in discarded notes or etched onto walls. Ingold might liken *Heaven's Vault* to "a chatty *Uncharted*", but this is something fascinatingly different.

Exploring a temple in an early build of the game, we happen across a number of symbols on an outer wall by a tangle of ivy. Aliya remarks to her robotic assistant Six that she hasn't encountered these groupings before: as the glyphs appear in front of us, we're invited to select a choice of two words, a question mark showing that she's just guessing at their translation. Garden or temple? Is or of? Stream or dead? There's water flowing nearby, so 'garden of stream' could be roughly right. But the place is also crumbling and empty, so 'temple is dead' might be the words we're looking for. And here's the twist: you won't immediately know if you're right or wrong.

"For later translation attempts you'll be making hypotheses about new words based on assumptions about old ones that may or may not be correct," Ingold says. "But at the same time we do want to make a game that's fun and approachable." As such, the more translations Aliya finds, the more context she'll have to scrub out earlier, incorrect ones. But if she's confirmed a word's translation, it's likely because she's unlocked further words stemming from it. "So you've always got something to worry about," Ingold smiles.

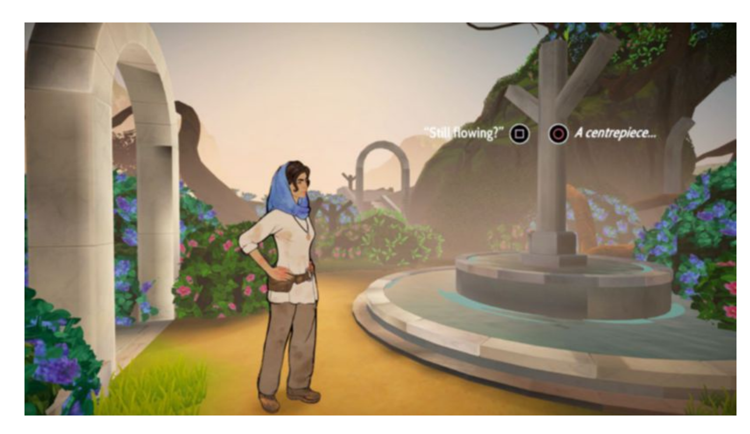
As her knowledge grows, Aliya will face more complex translations. The three choices of two words we faced are child's play, Humfrey says: though the temple we visit is "between 30 to 70 percent" through the game, it's relatively simple. And if that seems a wide estimate, it's because progression is non-linear: Aliya can visit locations in any order, with the inscriptions adapting to the player's progress while remaining context-specific.

While the central Chandler-esque mystery of a missing roboticist provides an absorbing narrative hook, it's the process of interpreting this ancient language that looks most likely to provoke post-game debate. "Players are trained to tidy up, essentially: to find the exact right answer, to solve every puzzle, to collect every Achievement, to get 100 per cent of everything," Ingold says. "We're creating an environment in which that isn't possible and isn't the point. I think there's something really beautiful about that." ■

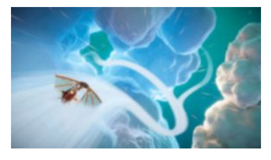


Panel show

The exploration sequences in *Heaven's Vault* look and feel different to any other thirdperson game. It uses a striking combination of 2D art and 3D environments: Aliya and Six advance in short steps, almost like an old-fashioned stop-motion animation, where a faint trace of their last position briefly remains. "We started thinking about interactive graphic novels which were inherently 2D," Humfrey says. "We built 3D environments partly so that we could compose comic-book panel frames using a dynamic camera, but as we experimented with just swinging the 3D camera around, it turned into something more ambitious." That might partly explain why it's been in development for so long. Humfrey: "Even coming from a triple-A background, we're still slightly surprised at just how much extra work it is to go fully 3D."







TOP **The game was originally more of a side-scrolling point-and-click adventure, Ingold explains. "But it felt like it was fighting against the story that we wanted to tell. You're an archaeologist – it's about exploration and discovery, and the restricted viewpoint made it feel very abstract."**
ABOVE **Though you're exploring the past, this is a game set in the future: Aliya works at the University of Iox, one of the richest places in the Nebula – a network of moons.**
RIGHT **Collecting clues tentatively places events within a timeline – certain discoveries will narrow things down, allowing you to more accurately pinpoint the age of a site**

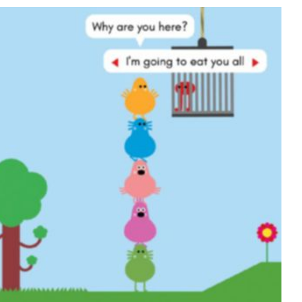




TOP **Six isn't able to squeeze through narrow gaps, and frets about Aliya when they're apart. Sometimes you'll simply have to explore alone; at others, you'll need to find another way to let him through.**
LEFT **The more inscriptions you find, the more Aliya will be able to assess the veracity of her translations: it's satisfying to see her add one to her dictionary from an educated guess you took**

Developer Sectordub
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, Switch
Origin France, UK
Release Autumn





PIKUNIKU

This funny dystopian puzzle game has certainly got legs

What a lovely day in the village: the sun is shining, the birds are singing, and its bewhiskered citizens are rolling over one another while going about their day. It'd be idyllic, were it not for the nagging feeling we're being watched. Indeed, as we walk past a billboard advertising 'Free Money!', a CCTV camera pops out from behind it. We turn back, but it's already gone.

Pikuniku is an odd game, a silly physics-based puzzler that looks like it was created in Microsoft Paint and that tasks you with uncovering a deep state conspiracy. One minute, we're rolling down hills *LocoRoco*-style; the next, we're watching a flying robot mutilate the landscape as villagers happily count their cash. *Pikuniku*'s strangeness is perhaps to be expected, given its inspirations and creators. "I chose to work with Rémi [Forcadell] because he's got a very peculiar way of thinking about games," says game designer **Arnaud de Bock**.

Two years ago, artist and coder Forcadell posted a tweet of a character design that would become *Pikuniku*'s gangly hero. It was part of a procedural animation test, programming a character model that could adapt to the terrain it was stepping on. At the time, Forcadell was depressed, often unable to leave his bed. "He was thinking, 'Why am I not able to walk?' And I guess he used code to make this fun experiment to feel better somehow," de Bock says. "Everything started with this idea of walking from A to B, and how just the act of walking could be joyful."

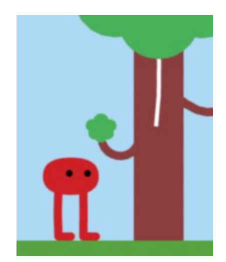
Walking is a bit of an understatement. Pleasingly stretchy and snappy, Piku's legs aren't simply a means of locomotion, but can also attach to grapple points to help him swing between platforms, or deliver powerful kicks to solve puzzles (one, in which we hoof a spider across a gap to fix a bridge, plays out with impeccable comic timing). These range from abstract situations to more traditional brainteasers, such as spinning cogs to rotate platforms.

None of the puzzles we try are particularly elegant – but *Pikuniku* places emphasis on physical comedy, rather than challenge. "When it comes to games, I'm a very strange player," de Bock says. "I don't really like challenges, or scores, or feeling like I have to be the best. I love to discover new mechanics, but I'm not a hardcore gamer at all. I love games that make me laugh." Indeed, the one vaguely competitive part of our *Pikuniku* demo is a game of 'baskick' against an AI opponent, and we're too busy stifling laughs while trying to punt basketballs into nets – and our rival in the head – to worry about the score. And a mechanic involving putting on a pencil hat to draw a new face for a scarecrow is swiftly introduced, then discarded just as quickly.

> *"I love to discover new mechanics, but I'm not a hardcore gamer at all"*

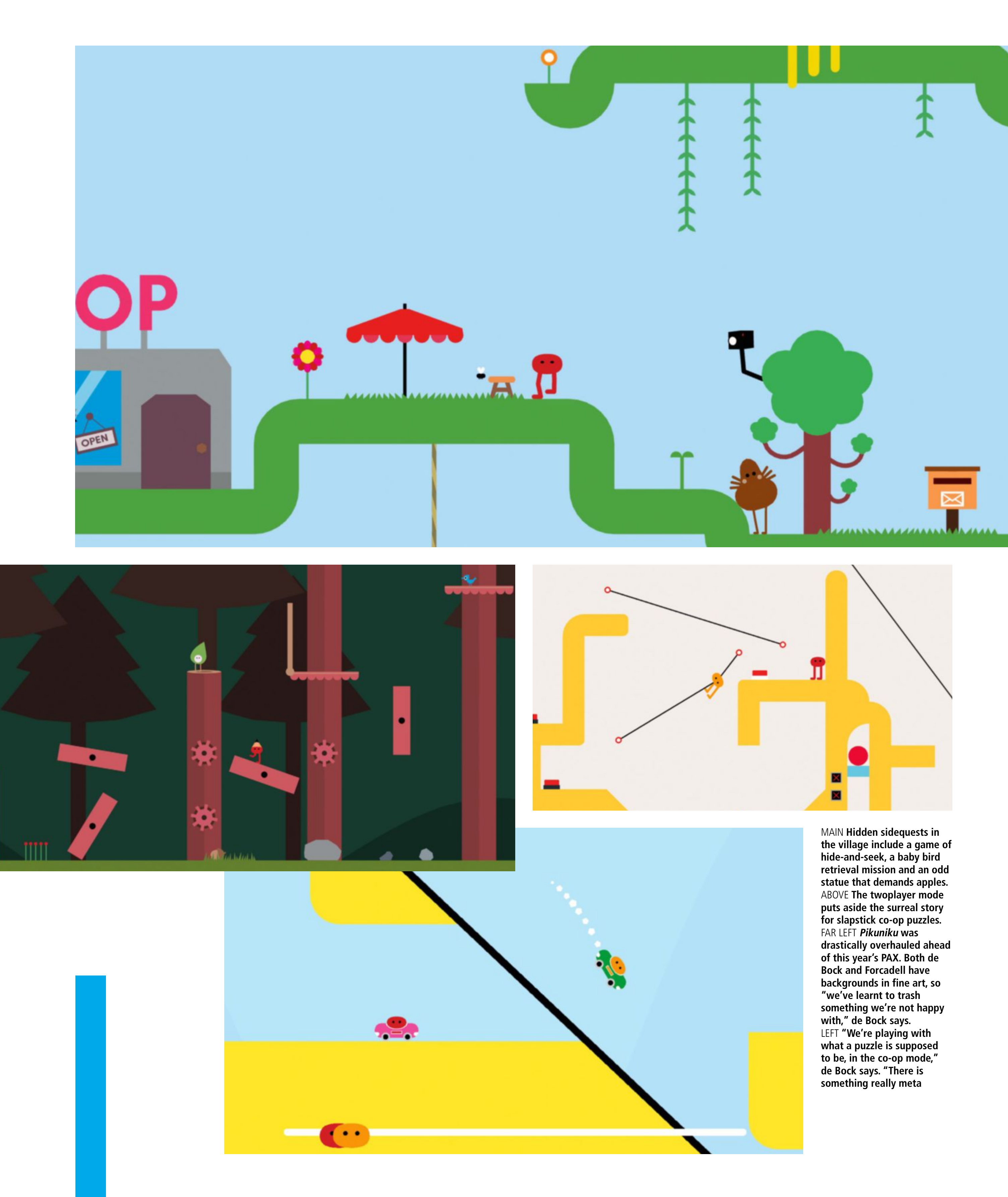
But there's an undercurrent of sadness underneath the whimsy, as *Pikuniku*'s charming cast give more and more of their autonomy and resources over to a shady corporation in exchange for cash handouts. "The people say they're happy because they've got a lot of money, but they're destroying the environment," de Bock says. He compares *Pikuniku*'s hidden political layers to *Earthbound*; we, meanwhile, can't help but think of *Katamari Damacy*. "It's not to say we are ecological warriors, but I think it's good that the player thinks about it – what is your price, you know? It's maybe very naive to have this message, but at the same time, that's where we are now, with all the planet getting fucked up.

"When you make a game, you've got a huge responsibility. I think any act is political, but especially when you are talking to thousands of people. And I think it's very important to have humour in games – it's a very powerful tool." ■



Japan air

Pikuniku's adorable but unsettling aura is a result of several different influences. Its simplistic visual design combines de Bock's nostalgia for Flash games, and his admiration for the art of Paul Klee. The juxtaposition of its cheerful facade with serious topics, meanwhile, takes inspiration from modern cartoons and graphic novels. "When you read Japanese manga, or even European comics, they mix this friendly aesthetic with talking about real subjects – what freedom is, and things like that," de Bock says. He is a big fan of *Katamari* creator Keita Takahashi's work, and attributes his chosen career to it. Takahashi played *Pikuniku* at PAX last year: "He told me that the title comes from Japanese, but the pronunciation is not right. He was like, 'Why do you write 'Pikuniku'? It's not a good spelling!'"



MAIN **Hidden sidequests in the village include a game of hide-and-seek, a baby bird retrieval mission and an odd statue that demands apples.** ABOVE **The twoplayer mode puts aside the surreal story for slapstick co-op puzzles.** FAR LEFT ***Pikuniku* was drastically overhauled ahead of this year's PAX. Both de Bock and Forcadell have backgrounds in fine art, so "we've learnt to trash something we're not happy with," de Bock says.** LEFT **"We're playing with what a puzzle is supposed to be, in the co-op mode," de Bock says. "There is something really meta**



ENDLESS MISSION

Developer/publisher E-Line Media **Format** PC **Origin** US **Release** TBC



This is quite the departure from the makers of charming, heartfelt Inuit adventure *Never Alone*. *Endless Mission* is a game about making games, in which you collect cubes containing game genres then throw them together before jumping in to see what's emerged, using sliders to tweak various parameters. Made in partnership with Endless Interactive, whose Endless OS seeks to bring computing within reach of the absolute novice, it's got its heart in the right place. Throw in a script from *Red Dead Redemption* writer Christian Cantamessa and you've got a curious beast, but one we'll certainly be keeping a close eye on.

SPIDER-MAN

Developer Insomniac Games **Publisher** SIE **Format** PS4 **Origin** US **Release** September 7



Last year's E3 demonstration looked worryingly on-rails, with its focus on story and combat. We're all here for the web-slinging, Insomniac – and so web-slinging it has given us, by way of a new reveal. Spidey swan-dives and hurtles between skyscrapers with precision and flair: his momentum and trajectory change depending on the point you leave the arc of a swing, so you can even pull off sharp turns and 180s. September can't come soon enough.

SMASH HIT PLUNDER

Developer/publisher Triangular Pixels
Format PSVR **Origin** UK **Release** 2018



This endearingly silly VR game puts you in the robes of a mage who inherits the family's medieval castle – and, with it, a mountain of debt. Down you head into its chunky-pixel depths to loot everything in sight in the hope of paying it off, fighting monsters and avoiding ghosts solo or in co-op.

YAKUZA KIWAMI 2

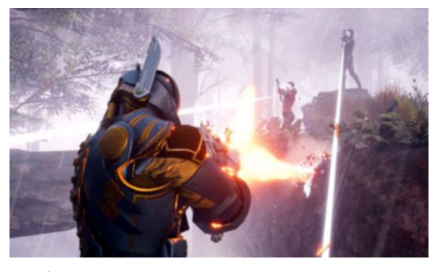
Developer Sega **Publisher** Sega
Format PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** August 28



Like buses, aren't they? Next here is this remake of Kazuma Kiryu's second outing; running on the Dragon Engine that powered *Yakuza 6*, new additions include a mode that makes Goro Majima playable, and Y6's Clan Creator, a light RTS bolstered by the likenesses of several Japanese pro wrestlers.

DEATHGARDEN

Developer/publisher Behaviour Interactive
Format PC **Origin** Canada **Release** 2018



Next from the *Dead By Daylight* developer is this asymmetrical multiplayer game which casts players as either the bow-using Runners or the gun-wielding Hunter. The sci-fi styling, part *Destiny* and part *Absolver*, flatters it; the setting, a futuristic, brutal TV show, is achingly of-the-moment Twitch bait.


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M A S T E R



CRAFTING

The evolving art of game resurrection gives new meaning to rekindling the flame

By Nathan Brown

Yep, this is *Dark Souls* all right. It's *Dark Souls* when we batter the Taurus Demon at the first time of asking, its new furry textures no match for hours of deep-seated muscle memory and the Gold Pine Resin we instinctively know to pick up on the way. It's *Dark Souls* when we weave through raining firebombs on the path up to the aqueduct by Firelink, when we bait out the Hollows hiding behind cover as you come into Undead Burg, and when, with Taurus defeated, we remove all our clothing in order to make the sprint along the bridge without being burnt to a crisp.

And, yes, fine. It's *Dark Souls* when we cockily take on the Black Knight on the run to the Taurus fight, when we fall off that ledge after getting tangled up in the physics model of a corpse, and on multiple other occasions where, after assuming our thumbs remember *Dark Souls* as well as our brain does, we respawn at the bonfire, licking our wounds and trying not to think about how stupidly we just lost all those souls. This is *Dark Souls*, exactly as we remember it.

And that is precisely the point. Yes, there's a commercial purpose to remastering the classics. They give publishers the chance to re-sell a game that you've already bought, while also hopefully hooking in a new audience. With *Dark Souls Remastered*, Bandai Namco has the opportunity to make some more dough from a series that, if creator Hidetaka Miyazaki is to be believed, is now finished. There's something in it for original developer FromSoftware, too, since it keeps the studio's name in the public consciousness while it beavers away in secret on its next project. And there's a wider, almost ethical purpose to the whole endeavour, ensuring beloved classics aren't simply casualties in the technological arms race, boxed up in the loft when a new generation of hardware comes along.

All those things are important, and all are valid reasons for keeping old games alive. This kind of work is more popular than ever, and is being carried out all over the world in a variety of ways – from straight ports to ground-up remakes, from commercial endeavours to games made new and given away for free. Yet what unites the technical minds behind the new wave of remasters is the belief that the overarching goal is to let people play old games the way they remember them being, not how they actually are.

That's certainly the case with *Dark Souls Remastered*. Upon its announcement, the highly passionate *Souls* community immediately started work on its wishlist. It'd be a full visual overhaul, like Bluepoint's *Shadow Of The Colossus* rework. It'd have remixed enemy placements, as featured in *Scholar Of The First Sin*, the current-gen port of *Dark Souls II*. Maybe the more thrown-together elements of the original game – areas in the weaker final third of the game, such as Lost Izalith – would be polished up. Perhaps entire new areas or classes would be added.

None of that has happened – from what we've seen, anyway, since our PR handlers forbid us from progressing past our first meeting with Solaire. This is not a final build or even an up-to-date one, and the last thing Bandai Namco wants is for us to report on framerate problems in a beta build that have long since been fixed. Weird as it is to travel to the publisher's UK offices to play an hour of a game we've already sunk several hundred into on multiple platforms, it lays clear the purpose of a remaster, and the pitfalls of one. If they are to be done, they must be done properly, as good as perfectly, the way you remember them being in your head. ▶





Some legacy issues are being tackled head on. "We are aware of the issue regarding Blighttown and feel bad about making the players feel troubled and stressed," Bandai Namco producer Atsuo Yoshimura tells us. "We have heard the voice from the community regarding this matter, and have made sure it was a topic that was looked into for the remaster"

THE OVERARCHING GOAL IS TO LET PEOPLE PLAY OLD GAMES THE WAY THEY REMEMBER THEM



One aspect missing from our *DSR* playtest is HDR support. Atsuo Yoshimura: "Our goal was to recreate and provide the original game's feel and atmosphere on the most recent hardware. As a result, rather than focusing on displaying the game in HDR, we used the original game's visuals as a base in order to produce what we wanted"

We're playing on PS4 Pro, the game running at a near-unbroken 60fps in 3200x1800 resolution; not quite full 4K, no, but still a tremendous increase over the original console release. Some textures have been replaced, others improved, and some left alone – and in an example of real commitment to the source material, some entirely untextured surfaces in the original game have been left as such. The occasional blank spot of stonework aside, all textures benefit from improved filtering. There is an upgraded lighting model, better particle effects on fog gates and the clouds of dust that kick up from destroyed scenery, and a heavy scaling back of the aggressive depth-of-field effect used to mask fuzzy LOD on distant objects in the original versions.

There are a handful of quality-of-life improvements too; nothing transformative, and all borrowed from later games in the series. Jump controls can be remapped, for instance, while you can now consume stacks of an item in one go. The UI can be rescaled. Online supports six players, with password matching to connect with friends. But this is a light-touch remaster, one about bringing an old game to a new platform on the understanding that to tinker too much would likely invite more controversy than it was worth. Indeed, some parts of the *Souls* community are already upset by some of the remaster's changes, arguing the original lighting model was better, complaining about motion blur, or that the game isn't the same without its blurry depth-of-field. Others have argued Bandai Namco hasn't done enough, accusing it of a lazy cash-in.

All of them are probably going to buy it anyway, sure, but it's a fine case study in the questions that every developer, publisher or platform holder must consider when embarking upon a remastering project. How much should you do? How much *can* you do? How do you then go about it? And why are you bothering in the first place? We cast a net around this largely unglamorous, yet fascinating, part of the game industry to find out how old, often dead games are given new life, and why doing it has never been so popular.



IT'S NOT QUITE FULL 4K, BUT IT'S STILL A TREMENDOUS INCREASE OVER THE ORIGINAL

Polish development-services firm QLOC is the studio behind *Dark Souls Remastered* on PS4 and Xbox One (while China's Virtuos handles the Switch version). Even though it's not officially sanctioned to discuss the project, it is happy to talk about what began as a QA and localisation company and has grown into a much-in-demand producer of ports and remasters, working on such esteemed series as *Devil May Cry*, *Resident Evil* and *Dead Rising*. Given the breadth of services it offers, it is well placed to explain what publishers are interested in, and prepared to pay for. Not all remasters, after all, are created equal.

"There's a very broad spectrum," business development director **Pawel Ziajka** tells us. "Sometimes it can be a very simple remaster, which we would basically describe as a porting project from an older platform to a new one. Then there's essentially 'porting plus', a proper remaster. That requires work: it means retouching assets, recreating 3D models, making textures crisper, adding features, remodelling the UI… there are a lot of things that can be done.

"Sometimes clients just ask, 'OK, we need the minimum set of features – basically, the game should be a proper port. What else can you do?'"

That final question is what sets the new wave of remasters apart from the old days where it was enough to simply port a game so that it ran on the latest hardware. QLOC conducts extensive R&D on the original codebase ▶

to ascertain what will be possible, then puts together a pitch detailing what will be done, how long it will take, and what it will cost. At that point it becomes a matter of the publisher's ambition and, of course, its bottom line. "For some, cost is super-important," Ziajka says, "but for others it doesn't matter: 'This game just has to look as good as possible, work as fluid as possible, and that's it'."

As in any development project, a green light is naturally just the beginning. And there will be countless little fiddly problems to solve along the way. What makes the work done by QLOC and other companies of its kind different is that every one of those problems is caused by something created by a different developer, typically years before, and often halfway around the world. QLOC, like other remasterers, can get legacy code up and running in its engine in months. Then comes the brutal stuff.

"One of the most common problems we have is when we're trying to upgrade the game so it runs faster and more fluidly," says lead programmer **Cyryl Matuszewski**. "Ninety per cent of the time, we have issues with it. When a game is being created, especially for consoles, it's common to have a target [framerate] lock. Old games were targeted at 30fps; now we're moving to a new console, we want to play it at 60fps, and it simply doesn't work. The logic changes. The animations look weird, they're jittering. Physics break. We might have to rewrite algorithms so they behave exactly the same way in 60fps as they did at 30. We might have to change the levels, move the geometry, or move the doors so they stay open at the new framerate. It's the hardest work; it involves some creativity, rather than just craftsmanship."

Then there are political issues to navigate. The fuss over the changes to *Dark Souls Remastered* shows that some die-hard players want the original experience, warts and all, and it appears that applies to publishers too, when it suits them. Cyryl recalls doing extensive work on the user interface during QLOC's work on 2012 PS3 release *Devil May Cry HD Collection*, replacing the blurry PS2-era in-game typeface. Many months later, an edict from Capcom Japan saw all that work thrown away; the original UI remained, in all its ancient, blurry non-glory. Cyryl points out, wryly, that it was rapturously received by the original game's most passionate fans.

Yet on another remaster project for Capcom, QLOC did the opposite, tweaking *Resident Evil 4*'s aiming system for its release on PC. Again, the response was positive. "People are getting accustomed to remasters and ports, but they're also anticipating that when it comes out, there should be additional features," Matuszewski says. "When we started doing remasters, it was just a pure port, like, one-to-one. Now we're putting in new content, additional features, extra levels, characters, difficulty modes. People like that."

There was no new content in Bluepoint's lavish remake of *Shadow Of The Colossus*, which launched in February and set an absurd new standard for visual fidelity in an old game reborn. Even before that, Bluepoint was widely regarded as the master of its craft, bringing the *Uncharted*, *God Of War* and *Metal Gear Solid* series up to modern standards, and even working in the other direction by squeezing early Xbox One title *Titanfall* onto Xbox 360 with minimal compromise. It has made a career out of playing around with other people's code.

"We've been really fortunate to find really strong ▶

Not all remasters involve dredging up ancient code: less than four years separates the original version of *Resident Evil 6* and the re-release for PS4 and Xbox One. Having a PC version to use as a basis always helps, of course

PERCEPTION PROTECTION

Making a remaster is no longer just about making an existing game look better; it is also about filling in the gaps that old host hardware insisted were left blank. This is a technical challenge, certainly, but it also poses difficult artistic questions, as an art team in Texas, say, tries to blend in with a game made ten years ago by a team in Tokyo. "We have to be careful," Bluepoint president Marco Thrush says. "Whenever things aren't spelled out visually in a game, players will use their imagination to create their own version of those things. The problem is that everybody's imagination is different, so when we go in and spell out the details – even when we're guided by the original developer – there's a good chance we end up with a result that some people will disagree with."

QLOC CAN GET LEGACY CODE RUNNING IN ITS ENGINE IN MONTHS. THEN COMES THE BRUTAL STUFF



The gold standard: Bluepoint's 2018 PS4 take on Team Ico's *Shadow Of The Colossus*. If the studio's president, Marco Thrush, has his way, all of Bluepoint's future releases will be equally impressive

IT GETS BETTER FOR EVERY NEW ENGINE WITH WHICH IT MUST LEARN TO PLAY NICELY

talent that can pull apart codebases, convert the code and original assets, and get the original game up and running on our target platform within a few months," technical director **Peter Dalton** tells us. "Once you've seen numerous engines you're no longer that surprised by the odd way in which each original team uniquely solved problems. Each game engine has common components and systems, and while the implementation and feature sets might differ, the basic building blocks are very similar."

Ultimately, this is still game development. Dalton points out how, before they had even looked at a line of the code that controlled Agro, the protagonist's horse in *Shadow Of The Colossus*, the team knew the steed would be driven by typical systems: for animation, collision, physics and, in particular, traversal. "We learned early in the project the system Agro uses for navigation, and so our environment artists were able to update the navigation data as they remade the environment." Every time a new asset was created, it would be assigned a value the Agro AI would understand how to deal with. "Apparently," Dalton says, "Agro does not like large rocks."

Understanding another studio's engine and code is the foundation of remastering, and frequently, in Bluepoint's case, a perk of the job; plenty of developers around the world would give an arm to peek under *Uncharted*'s hood, or to see what Respawn did to Valve's Source engine in the making of *Titanfall*. By working this way, Bluepoint's staff learn a lot, indirectly, from some of the best technical minds in the business; little wonder that they, too, would level up along the way.

And it's Bluepoint's own engine that sets this studio's work apart. While traditional developers transition to new tech between projects or console generations, Bluepoint has been using its internal engine for as long as it's been in business – and along the way it's been improved by magic from Naughty Dog, Respawn, Sony Santa Monica and all the rest. The games Bluepoint ships do not run entirely on its engine; rather, they use a hybrid of Bluepoint's and the original games' tech, in what Dalton calls "a carefully choreographed dance, data handing back and forth between the two engines while delegating responsibilities and managing communication." It is the same engine every time, yet it is different, and it gets better for every new engine with which it must learn to play nicely.

Shadow Of The Colossus was, however, a unique project. Bluepoint staffed up considerably, doubling its headcount, most of that number naturally being the artists required for the biggest asset-creation job the studio had ever taken on. Mindsets and processes had to change, since art direction had never really been an issue for the studio; suddenly it needed to spend days in meetings discussing what the game should actually look like, and how to achieve it within budget. The game's open, sprawling structure forced a change in approach for a studio that normally broke projects up into discrete levels, and posed a further technical headache as Bluepoint pondered how to make Team Ico's barren world feel more modern without filling it with so much detail as to tank performance.

Familiar problems raised their heads too, of course. As on previous projects, once Bluepoint had *Shadow Of The Colossus* running on PS4, it hit 60fps pretty much everywhere, but the protagonist couldn't climb onto a colossus when the game was running above the original engine's 30fps lock. The team thought it had a ▶

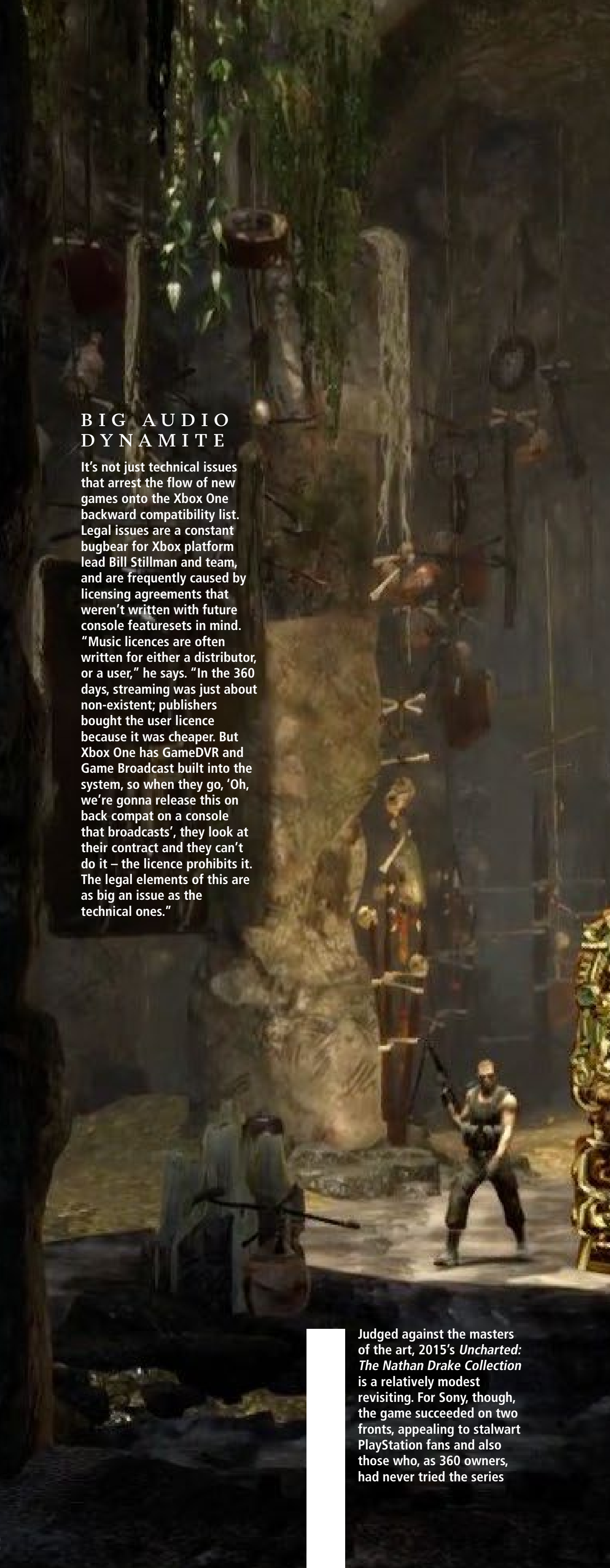
replacement for the tech behind one of the game's key mechanics, where light bounced off the hero's raised sword to show the path to the next colossus. In the PS2 game, that was achieved by placing lights at strategic points in the world, and a 2D texture on the sword. "During the final months, as the art really started to come together, it became apparent that the sword would not properly reflect light that did not exist in the original game," Dalton says. "And it was odd that the sword would shine when standing behind a pillar in the Shadow Of Worship." The solution was to replace the original game's light-detection system with one that took realtime feedback from the renderer about whether it was in the light or not, with an override texture on hand for any edge cases. "If there's one thing I've learned working on remasters and remakes," Dalton says, "it's that there will always be something new to bite you in the ass."

It was a bite well worth taking. While full sales data is yet to be made available, Bluepoint's *Shadow Of The Colossus* was the best-selling game in the UK during the week of its release, with physical sales up 73 per cent on the PS2 original. Bluepoint, with a larger headcount, further improved engine and its biggest success to date, can aim even higher next time. It will probably need to; after all, it has just raised the bar for the videogame remaster.

"There's that saying: with great power comes great responsibility," says Bluepoint president **Marco Thrush**. "As current-gen games get better looking – through improved workflows, more resources, and better hardware – the gap between what the original game and what it should look like by the time we're done is getting bigger and bigger. On previous projects we would take existing detail and improve it. Now we're creating detail that didn't originally exist."

Bluepoint's *Shadow* experience shows there's a tremendous amount of money to be made from a remaster or remake. Yet both Bluepoint and QLOC acknowledge that there are other, more holistic benefits to reviving classic games of yesteryear. The game industry has done a very poor job of preserving its own history, but that's slowly changing – and no more so than at Microsoft, where compatibility has become central to almost everything the company does. Phil Spencer's announcement at E3 2015 that Xbox 360 games would soon be playable on Xbox One was greeted as rapturously as any new game reveal; little did we know at the time that it was only the beginning of Microsoft's plan to keep old Xbox games in the public eye. The library of supported 360 games grows by the week, and original Xbox games are becoming compatible too. Yet Microsoft's greatest work has been on Xbox One X, with its engineers not only making 360 games compatible on the new console. It is improving them, too. Firstparty titles including *Halo 3* and *Crackdown*, and even thirdparty offerings such as *Mirror's Edge* and *Fallout 3*, run in native 4K – and even, in some cases, with HDR.

Oddly, the technique used for this very modern sort of remaster was first discovered (by Microsoft engineer Eric Heutche, after whom the Heutche Method was subsequently named) when Microsoft was working on making original Xbox games compatible on Xbox One. Using the One X's processing power, higher-quality assets are swapped in for the originals on the fly, the emulator beneath it assuming it is still running the original game. When the team moved onto Xbox One X, it first had to ensure all existing Xbox One games – which, by then, included a host of 360 titles – would be supported by the new console. ▶



BIG AUDIO DYNAMITE

It's not just technical issues that arrest the flow of new games onto the Xbox One backward compatibility list. Legal issues are a constant bugbear for Xbox platform lead Bill Stillman and team, and are frequently caused by licensing agreements that weren't written with future console featuresets in mind. "Music licences are often written for either a distributor, or a user," he says. "In the 360 days, streaming was just about non-existent; publishers bought the user licence because it was cheaper. But Xbox One has GameDVR and Game Broadcast built into the system, so when they go, 'Oh, we're gonna release this on back compat on a console that broadcasts', they look at their contract and they can't do it – the licence prohibits it. The legal elements of this are as big an issue as the technical ones."

Judged against the masters of the art, 2015's *Uncharted: The Nathan Drake Collection* is a relatively modest revisiting. For Sony, though, the game succeeded on two fronts, appealing to stalwart PlayStation fans and also those who, as 360 owners, had never tried the series



"IF THERE'S ONE THING I'VE LEARNED IT'S THAT THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOMETHING NEW TO BITE YOU IN THE ASS"



The latest 360 titles to benefit from enhanced backward compatible mode on Xbox One occasionally feel a little bit like magic. Here's the eight-year-old *Red Dead Redemption* running happily in 4K

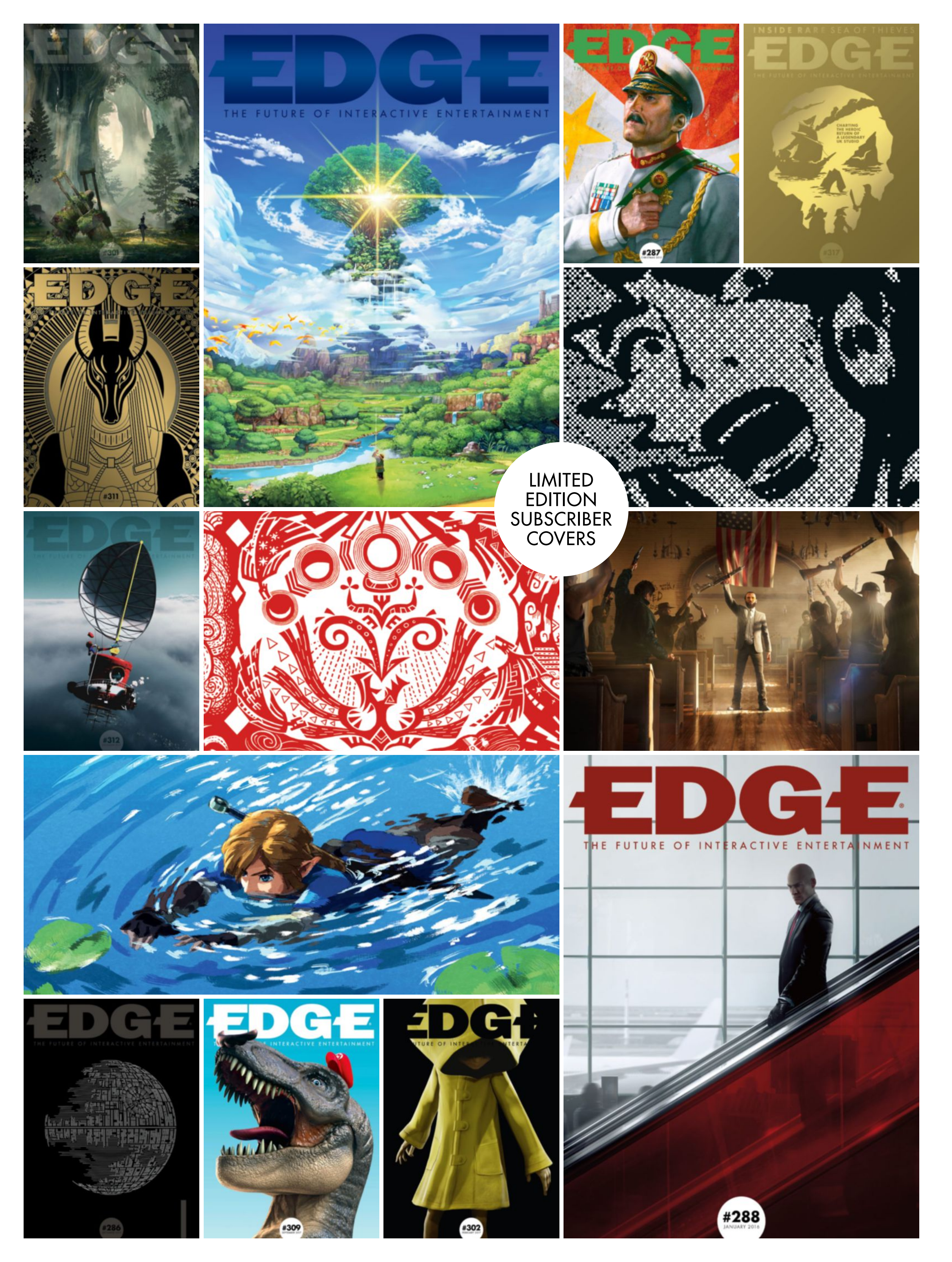


"We'd just got our first set of devkits in; they were just boards sitting on a mat," Xbox platform lead **Bill Stillwell** recalls. "Eric started tinkering and said, 'Okay, I've got a lot more power in Xbox One X. What could I do to a 360 game?' He took what we had done for the Xbox Originals games and applied it to *Halo 3* first. We were like, 'Holy cow – this looks like a brand-new game.'"

The Xbox team's new commitment to compatibility is powered by what is, to all intents and purposes, the most accurate emulator in all of videogames. If you've played around with an unofficial emulator, you'll know all about exceptions: the games that don't quite run at full speed, drop sound or frames at odd moments, or crash if you press a certain button at a certain point in the game. This exists on Xbox One, too – Stillman wistfully recalls the build of *Forza Horizon* that looked astounding, but had no collision model – but you never see them, because Microsoft won't add a game to the supported list until it's proven to be a perfect copy, a hundred-strong army of testers putting every game through its paces multiple times. Like Bluepoint's engine, Microsoft's 360 emulator becomes more accurate as more games pass through it – though that comes at a cost. "We're having to constantly tune the emulator to make it more precise," Stillman says, "but every time you make it more precise, you make it less powerful."

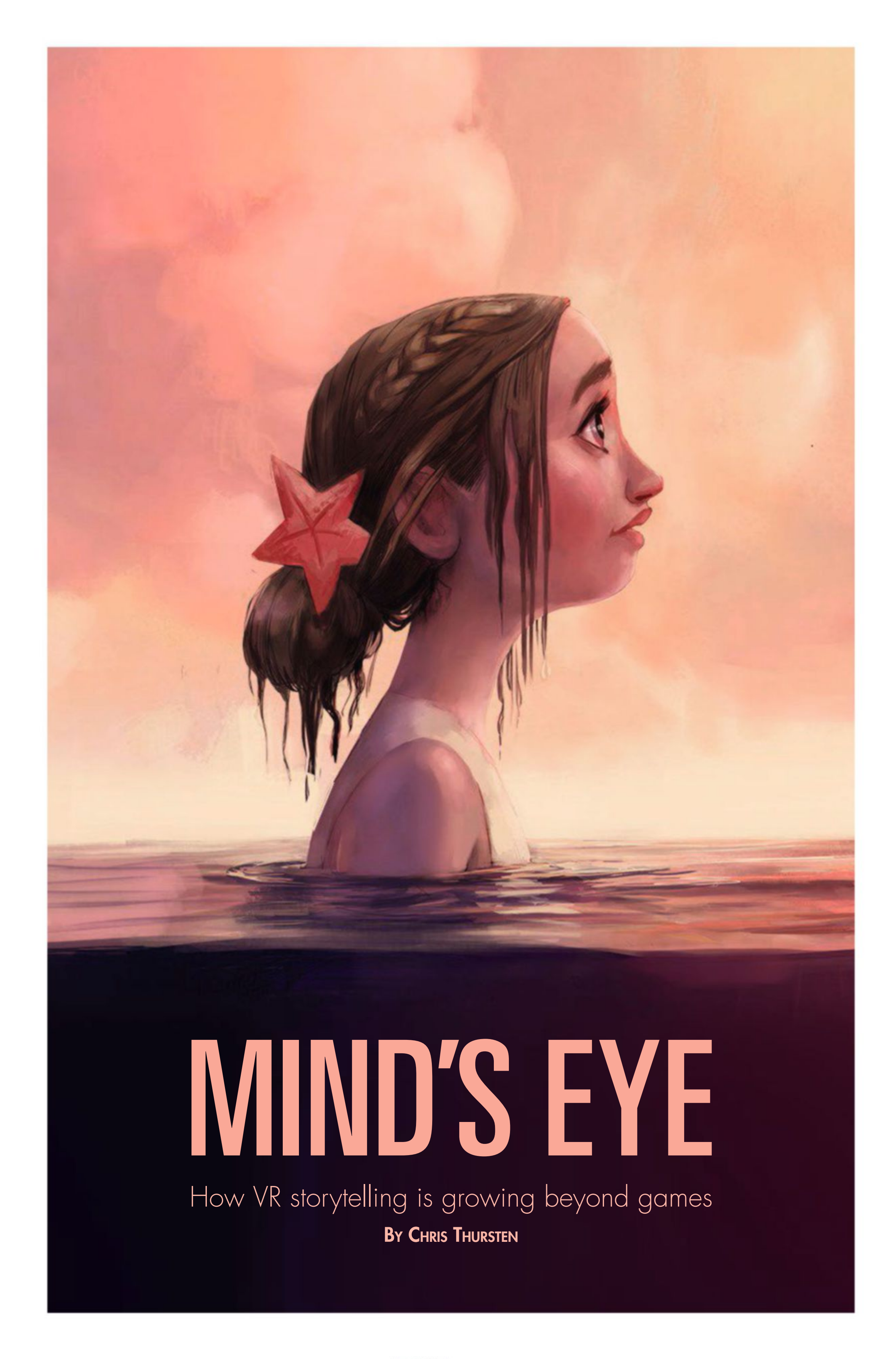
That's perhaps less of a concern on Xbox One X, but the work being done on old games is costlier than ever, particularly when it comes to HDR. While it may have been years before the high-gamut-colour boom, a number of 360 games were built in 10bit colour, the 8bit hardware simply dropping the part of the colour range it didn't need. Now, thanks to Microsoft's Advanced Technology Group, it can be restored, with *Mirror's Edge* and *Halo 3* among a slowly growing list of old games that support the industry's latest obsession. "The enhancements are a lot of work because we really have to go back and tune the performance profile so there's no change in the gameplay experience," Stillman says. "And we don't do half measures."

None of the teams featured in this story do, and it's precisely that commitment – the sense that there is no point doing a job that is not going to be done properly, and ideally perfectly – that has turned what once seemed a rather dreary part of the industry into one of its most vibrant. It's a job that gets harder as games get better, the need to go the extra mile resulting in a ground-up remake of a fan-favourite game, or a 10bit visual overhaul of a decade-old release. And sometimes it's enough to simply have a beloved old game on new hardware – the *Skate 3* on your living-room TV, the *Dark Souls* in your work bag. Our masthead may hail the future of interactive entertainment, but its past has never felt more relevant, or vital. ■



EDGE
THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT
#301
#287
INSIDE RARE SEA OF THIEVES
CHARTING THE HEROIC RETURN OF A LEGENDARY UK STUDIO
#317
#311
LIMITED EDITION SUBSCRIBER COVERS
#312
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#288
JANUARY 2016





MIND'S EYE

How VR storytelling is growing beyond games

By Chris Thursten

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2018
sundance
film festival

based on the book
by
NEIL GAIMAN & DAVE MCKEAN

WOLVES
in the
WALLS

directed by
PETE BILLINGTON

produced by
JESSICA SHAMASH



Colin Decker, COO of Within

Wolves In The Walls is a virtual reality adaptation of a Neil Gaiman story about a girl, Lucy, on the hunt for the prowling monsters that she perceives in the liminal spaces of her home. You are embodied as her imaginary friend. She 'draws' your eyes, allowing you to see, and later your hands, allowing you to help with the hunt using a torch and Polaroid camera. But ultimately this is not your mystery to solve, but Lucy's; Wolves In The Walls is an example of the emerging form of VR cinematic storytelling, a medium coming into focus as the headlong momentum of this new technology's early years matures into a new exploratory phase.

Wolves is the product of Fable, a studio founded in the aftermath of the closure last year of Oculus Story Studio. While at Oculus, this team produced Lost, the Emmy-winning short film Henry, and the Emmy-nominated Dear Angelica, an experience that places you inside an evocative piece of living pop-art. When Oculus shuttered Story Studio, the talent that it had gathered – a multidisciplinary group that included designers from both the game industry and cinema, particularly Pixar – joined a growing community of smaller studios for whom this new medium is an opportunity to break free, creatively, from the constraints and assumptions of its parent media.

"We think this will be the intersection of immersive theatre, narrative games and cinema," Fable executive producer **Edward Saatchi** tells us. "What motivates all of us is to create a new artform."

"We're on the verge of this brand-new wave of what we think of as storytelling," says **Eugene Chung**, the founder and CEO of Penrose Studios, whose work includes the Hans Christian Andersen-inspired Allumette and the upcoming Arden's Wake, a short about a girl and her father living in a watery post-apocalypse. "We think that these new mediums that are emerging – augmented reality, mixed reality, virtual reality – will not only be the next major computing platform, but also the next major artform."

Since the initial wave of crowdfunded enthusiasm that brought Oculus into being, the progress of VR has been typified by surges of momentum checked by periods of setback and calm. This is particularly apparent from the perspective of the game industry, whose traditional measures of success – both from a business and design perspective – do not align perfectly with VR's strengths. Developers and players of games contend with questions of personal power, movement, agency – the adaptation of flatscreen interactive experiences – while executives consider relatively slim hardware installed bases and software sales. VR has never provided easy answers to these questions.

Meanwhile, however, the alumni of Story Studio and their peers are finding success at film festivals and live events. They are building experiences designed solely with the strengths of virtual reality in mind; in doing so, they help highlight what those strengths actually are, and the role VR might play in contemporary culture.

"If you look at every artform that has emerged, they're different languages," Chung tells us. Although games and game players have had a large role in propelling VR to date, it may be that we come to consider VR's relationship with games as similar to that of film and theatre: a related form providing a baseline that must ultimately be diverged from.

"VR is moving step-for-step with the evolution of cinema in the early days," says **Colin Decker**, COO of Within, a boutique curator of VR experiences spanning animation, documentary and music videos. "We just passed across the Lumière phase, and we went past the Muybridge phase – meaning, people running and saying, 'Come to this theatre and watch a train hit you!'

"That phase is typically characterised by spectacle," Decker continues. "And spectacle is okay! I don't talk down to spectacle – it's the only way to get it going."

Today, however, Within is drawn to experiences with more substance. "The thing that we look for is depth," Decker says. "That's not to say complexity – you can make something that is very technical and complicated. We mean 'depth' in the sense that actually recalls the fundamentals of storytelling. The only stories worth telling are the ones that make you feel, make you think, that incite dialogue afterwards."

There is a refreshing optimism to this trend within VR – and it's not the tech-centric optimism typical to these technologies, which holds that all problems are fundamentally engineering problems, and have engineering solutions. Instead, there is a shared interest in the social and cultural significance of virtual reality, and in the role that VR may play in providing artistic experiences tailored to the concerns of our age.

"I think it's a fair statement to say that we are becoming a highly overconnected world," Decker ▶

LEFT **VR storytelling experiences are finding early adopters at film festivals, where virtual reality is emerging as a niche form in its own right. Many have found a receptive audience on app stores too, however – demand for high-quality VR experiences has resulted in an open-minded audience**

"WE THINK THAT THESE NEW, EMERGING MEDIUMS WILL NOT ONLY BE THE NEXT MAJOR COMPUTING PLATFORM, BUT ALSO THE NEXT MAJOR ARTFORM"

says, "and yet we are more disconnected than ever. For me, this technology promises the potential to be able to more deeply connect, to more deeply allow humans to relate. I firmly believe that we are over-saturated. That media saturation has driven a flight back to the tangible, the tactile, the artisanal."

It may seem strange to equate VR, a product of the world of Silicon Valley incubators and specialised consumer tech, with the resurgence of tabletop gaming, immersive theatre and installation art. Oculus is owned by Facebook, after all. Yet these experiences share a common sense of focus. They are specific and demand all of your attention, a break from having your perspective split between TV, monitor, and smartphone. VR stories can be shared and described like memories, but they are curiously resistant to social media. You cannot accurately Instagram an experience you had with a headset on.

"I think VR deals intrinsically with the idea of coexisting realities," **Saschka Unseld**, former creative director of Oculus Story Studio, tells us. Prior to working in VR and AR, Unseld was a layout artist at Pixar and writer and director of the short The Blue Umbrella. "You put the headset on and suddenly you're somewhere else. It's so counter to all of the other ways we experience life at the moment. It forces you to single-focus. Social is great, and everyone wants to be social and have social things, but a lot of that has to do with the financing structures of content as well – then it's monetisable 'social', and not just *social*. I like the idea that you can force someone to be by themselves, to experience something by themselves. There's an anarchy to that, nowadays, that I really quite like."

This notion of submersion as subversion is central to VR's potential to furnish artistically credible, wholly realised experiences. From this perspective, the awkwardness of wearing a virtual reality headset – the way it robs you of your other senses – is not a tech problem to be solved but a strength that defines the medium.

"Its greatest weakness from one perspective is also a strength," says **Jordan Thomas**, co-founder of *The Magic Circle* and *The Blackout Club* creator Question and former designer on the *BioShock* series. Thomas was a consultant on Wolves In The Walls, contributing game-design expertise along with fellow immersive-sim veteran Doug Church.

"The curated world is almost becoming the new baseline," Thomas says, describing a trend in modern digital entertainment that VR has the potential to challenge. "You're going to have control over any element of your experience as long as you're willing to pay for it. Making you feel like the protagonist, making you feel important, indulging the urge to alter that which is not to your taste – there's tremendous money in it."

For Thomas, VR's most exciting potential stems from the ways it runs counter to these traditionally videogameish impulses. "To first of all make yourself physically vulnerable by becoming blind to the world around you, and secondly to trust that the people who are going to put the entire world around you have your best interests at heart – consenting to reduced expertise in navigating the world – that can be used to such glorious effect! It's only VR and poetry, and maybe some very experimental installation art, that can use that vulnerability in a way that augments meaning, rather than increases frustration."

Effective storytelling in VR takes advantage of this vulnerability to forge a sense of empathy with a character and the world they occupy. This can be turned to powerful purpose, as in Within's Clouds Over Sidra – a VR film about the Syrian refugee crisis – or The People's House, an exploration of the Obama White House by VR filmmakers Felix & Paul. "The fundamental order-of-magnitude gain that I saw was VR's ability to allow others to walk in each other's shoes," Decker says.

This kind of VR experience is fundamentally a vector for emotion: it has a transportive potential similar to music, and as such music videos are a natural fit. Former Double Fine animator and character artist **Tyler Hurd** has broken ground in this regard, using music by Future Islands, Giraffage and Justice. These works – Old Friend, Chocolate, and Chorus – are silly and rousing in equal measure, an exuberant invitation to unselfconsciousness. "I wanted this overwhelming, joyous feeling," Hurd tells us. "I wanted to pinpoint it, throw it in people's faces and make it as intense as possible. Just make people feel joy."

Hurd's music videos surround you with intricately animated dancers and spectacular effects. They are lightly reactive, but you are not required to take any particular action. In Old Friend, looking directly at dancing clouds or mountains will cause them to grin and wave back. In Chocolate, a vibration in your handheld controllers precedes the eruption of a ▶

RIGHT **Tyler Hurd's Chocolate, set to the track of the same name by Giraffage, creates a sense of playfulness by surrounding you with vibrant animated characters. Look down at the reflective floor and you'll discover that you've become a dancing, multi-limbed android yourself**





Saschka Unseld (top), co-founder and creative director of Oculus Story Studio, and Question co-founder Jordan Thomas

"FOR ME, THIS TECHNOLOGY PROMISES THE POTENTIAL TO BE ABLE TO MORE DEEPLY CONNECT, TO MORE DEEPLY ALLOW HUMANS TO RELATE"

OFFICIAL SELECTION 2017
sundance
film festival

chocolate

PRESENTED BY VIACOM NEXT A VR EXPERIENCE BY GENTLE MANHANDS DIRECTED BY TYLER HURD
PRODUCED BY ADAM ROGERS CONCEPT ARTIST JESSE BALMER 3D ARTIST FREDERIK STORM VFX ARTIST JOHN ZWICKER ANIMATOR PROGRAMMER TYLER HURD
POSTER DESIGN MINHYUL BAE ORIGINAL RECORDING CHOCOLATE BY GIRAFFAGE FROM NO REASON (C) 2014 FOOL'S GOLD RECORDS EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FOR VIACOM NEXT CHAKI NG ROBERT RUFFLER DAVID LIU


Dear Angelica
AN OCULUS STORY STUDIO PRODUCTION DEAR ANGELICA
VFX SUPERVISOR INIGO QUILEZ VFX ARCHITECT CHRISTOPHER HORVATH CG SUPERVISOR CHRIS HORNE
ENVIRONMENT LEAD MATT BURDETTE EFFECTS LEAD ROBERT CHEN INTERACTIVE LEAD JOHN BALLANTYNE INTERACTIVE DESIGNER DAVID HUANG
MUSIC AND SOUND DESIGN BY DRAZEN BOSNJAK AUDIO LEAD TOM BIBLE DEVELOPMENT PRODUCER ANGELA PETRELLA PRODUCER RYAN GENJI THOMAS
HEADS OF STORY STUDIO MAXWELL PLANCK SASCHKA UNSELD EDWARD SAATCHI ART DIRECTOR WESLEY ALLSBROOK DIRECTED BY SASCHKA UNSELD
oculus
storystudio

LEFT **Dear Angelica places you in the bedroom of a young movie fan as she writes to her favourite filmstar. Viewers discover the connection between the two characters through a series of stunning pop-art vignettes that spring to life in 360 degrees**



Jennine Willett, co-artistic director of Third Rail Projects

A PLACE FOR VR

The question of where VR is best experienced is an open one. Many of these formative storytelling experience live dual lives in VR app stores and at festivals like Sundance or Tribeca. The rise of VR arcades and site-specific experiences like Lucasfilm and ILMxLAB's VOID suggest that the future may be through ticketed experiences, though there is little consensus about what an ideal permanent venue for them might look like. Even so, new experiences are being crafted with that in mind. Tyler Hurd's Chorus – a music video for the Justice song of the same name – is built for multiple participants in order to make it ideal for this kind of shared, in-person VR experience.

shower of glittering neon cats that burst from your robot hands, hang in space, look back at you, and wink out of existence. The appropriate response is, probably, to dance, but there is no consequence if you choose not to.

"I'm not interested in complicated branching narrative, complicated interactivity," Hurd says. "I mostly want to refine the emotional experience one gets when they're inside. There's so much emotional response that doesn't exist anywhere else but in VR. That's what I've been so fascinated with: how do you play around with someone's emotional response? How do you pinpoint the exact feeling that you're trying to get?"

Refining these works is a complex and highly iterative process, one that draws expertise from many disciplines – but also, significantly, from immersive theatre, which has much to teach VR in terms of interaction design, comfort, and the effective transmission of feeling.

"When we create our immersive performances, we spend a lot of time defining who the audience is in the world," says **Jennine Willett**, co-artistic director of Third Rail Projects. Third Rail was also a consultant on Wolves In The Walls, helping with development from its origins at Oculus Story Studio to its new home at Fable.

"This notion is very different in VR," she continues. "It is hard to feel present when you are disembodied, and it is hard to know who you are in the experience if you think you are invisible. In Wolves In The Walls, the viewer is an integral part of the story, so the very first moment of engagement with Lucy needed to establish the viewer's presence in the world, as well as his or her agency and value."

Third Rail co-artistic director Zach Morris introduced a solution, which was to have Lucy draw the viewer's eyes at the beginning of the story – then, not wanting an adult for company, she re-draws you at her own height. This would be physically impossible in a 'real' immersive performance, but is fundamentally drawn from the experience of immersive performers. "This is a valuable step in creating the relationship to her as a peer or, better yet, as a friend," Willett says. "The viewer sees eye to eye with her, and also empathetically and figuratively sees the world through her eyes too."

Determining the appropriate level of viewer agency within a VR story was an area where game design expertise was essential, even if the eventual solution was un-game-like. "At the time, there was still a significant debate about how much of a game this was, versus how much of a movie, etc," Jordan Thomas says. "We started to let those terms fall away naturally, as they needed to. It became a place that you go to visit this character, Lucy, and to co-occupy space with her in a way that no other medium allowed."

Building a sense of a connection between the viewer and a character who acts as their focus is a theme that binds otherwise-divergent VR experiences. "Two-and-a-bit years ago we started to ask: what is the future of storytelling in VR?" says Fable's Edward Saatchi. "We started to think that it was an interactive AR or VR character – more like Joi in Blade Runner 2049 – and focused on building that."

Wolves In The Walls' Lucy is both the medium through which her story is told and proof of concept for a form of interactive character that Saatchi believes will be essential to both VR storytelling and AI design in the future. She tells you the story, hands you tools to help you participate in it, and can react to things you do or don't do – although this is more about triggering your sense of presence than it is about allowing the viewer to steer the narrative. Although Wolves shares some common ground with narrative games such as *Gone Home* or *Firewatch*, a crucial point of difference is the way that VR supports a focus on character rather than environment.

"In a lot of narrative games, the story has already happened and you're spending your time uncovering a memory," Saatchi says. "We didn't want to do that – we didn't want to create an exploration game where you're picking up journals or diary entries. We wanted to do something where the action was happening in the present tense."

This endeavour is helped, rather than hindered, by the limitations of VR. Agency, preeminence and control – the fundamental assumptions of a videogame – do not always lead to greater immersion or empathy, and in fact often cause problems for storytellers. Although Lucy is in part inspired by the work done by game developers on interactive characters such as *The Last Of Us*'s Ellie or *BioShock Infinite*'s Elizabeth, she does not live the kind of double life that they do – she is not there to both tell you a story and hand you ammo. Lucy is not your sidekick; you are hers.

"We always knew it was a companion relationship," Saatchi says, "but it was a big lightbulb moment when we realised that we were her companion and that she was the main character." ▶

"WE DIDN'T WANT TO CREATE AN EXPLORATION GAME. WE WANTED TO DO SOMETHING WHERE THE ACTION WAS HAPPENING IN THE PRESENT TENSE"

The difference is striking: abdicating responsibility for driving the plot to an AI-driven character frees the viewer to engage more, and to experiment without fear of breaking the experience. VR game developers dream of offering players greater and greater degrees of freedom, but the technology does not fully support those aims. Wolves In The Walls is an example of what can be done with the headsets and controllers that currently exist.

"It sounds ignoble, but to really embrace the constraints of a medium is the hallmark of an artist who will one day achieve mastery," says Jordan Thomas. "If you're trying to make a painting do what a film does, on some level you're going to fail."

Placing the viewer in a more passive role – more akin to an immersive theatre participant, or some strange hybrid of a film viewer and cinematographer – is nonetheless a careful balancing act. For creators coming from the film and animation industries, the amount of iteration and testing that VR storytelling requires can be a challenge. "Traditionally there is a clear distinction between pre-production, the story phase, and then production," says Saschka Unseld. "The talent that you use are very different people that are used to these different processes. Then in VR, suddenly, it clashes."

The challenge of creating empathy with a character, and of crafting experiences that audiences relate to, requires experimentation. Innovations are often subtle. In Wolves In The Walls, Third Rail was instrumental in improving the rate at which viewers accepted the objects that Lucy wanted to give them. In the team's immersive theatre productions, they had learned that having somebody look away from the participant made people feel more comfortable interacting: when Lucy averted her eyes while passing the viewer the Polaroid camera, engagement shot up.

These considerations reward studios that can iterate quickly. For Wolves, the solution was to have Third Rail adapt the VR experience to a physical space and have real performers stand in for digital characters – allowing designers to experiment free from the constraints of software. "I think this was an interesting experiment for both sides and proved a viable way of approaching the creative process for VR," says Third Rail's Jennine Willett.

For Penrose, the solution was to create Maestro – a toolkit that allows artists and engineers to collaborate on VR projects within a virtual reality environment. "If you're going to make VR, then the more we can make our products and stories and worlds in VR, then the better it is," Eugene Chung says. "The more we learn to speak this new artistic language in VR – that's been a really important thing for us."

For each of the parties at work in this new field, the future looks different. For Edward Saatchi and Fable, this is the beginning of a journey that places artists and designers at the centre of what has been traditionally considered an engineering problem – the creation of believable AI. "There's an interesting thing about the future of interactive designers, that class of skillset, and how relevant they'd be to AI characters – and how relevant AI characters may be to everything we do in the future," he says.

For others, it is an opportunity to create with impunity in a medium without established rules. "I'm treating this as a creative gift," says Tyler Hurd. "Whereas other people have a long-term strategy or a goal in mind, everything I've been doing has been in the moment. I've been treating this situation as if it'll go away at any moment."

"The nice thing about it is that it feels like the early music video days when there was way more leeway for the creator to do weird stuff," says Saschka Unseld. "In VR that's still the case if you push for it." He laughs. "Partly it's just because the company or client doesn't even know how to get the headset to run, so they can't even do proper reviews themselves."

There is a sense that, one way or another, this period of freeform creation and growth will not last: VR will mature and find its form. Within's Colin Decker is confident that, when that happens, control will remain with the creators who are currently defining VR storytelling as a medium. "It will be a diversified and democratised environment," he predicts. "And within that environment there are going to be an incredible variety of opportunities to play and to develop business and to really do interesting things.

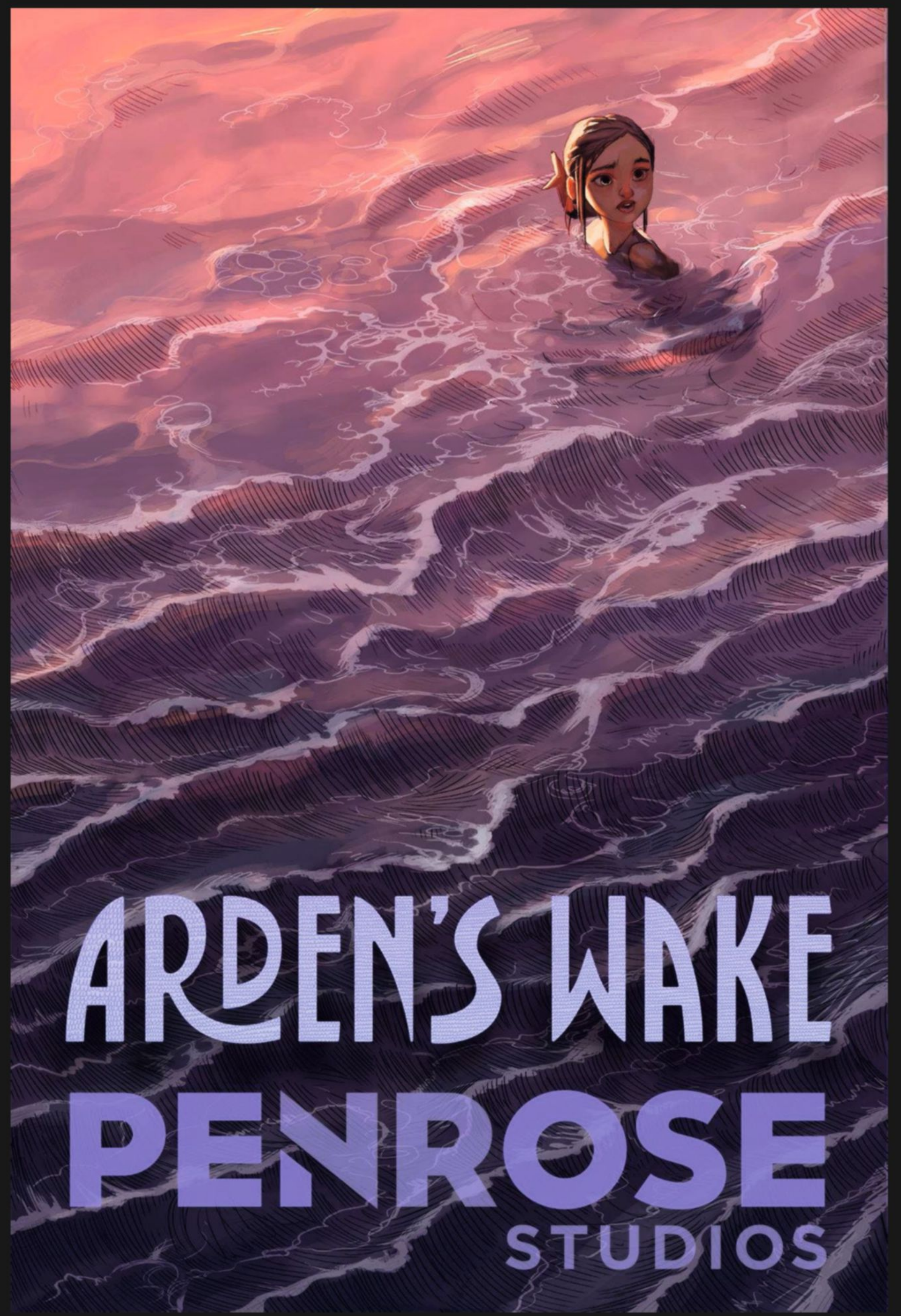
"One of the really exciting things about being at Sundance last year was how many of us looked around – who had actually been at Sundance in the early '90s – and were like, 'This feels like Sundance again'. Y'know? The real party is at somebody's hotel room and we're talking about the work, trading ideas and challenging each other. That's what's happening right now. We're very excited about it. We want to break the rules." ■

RIGHT **The forthcoming Arden's Wake is set in a post-apocalyptic ocean world where a young girl sets off on a journey to discover the fate of her father**

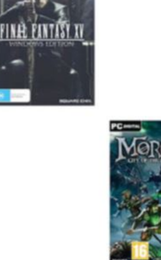
FRANCHISE OPPORTUNITIES

Existing IPs have played a substantial role in the early development of VR: Star Wars alone has driven sales of the PSVR headset and forms the basis of ILMxLAB's VOID. It would be naive to say that the promise of 'visiting' beloved fictional universes is not a major factor in the success of the Oculus at a crowdfunding level, or VR won't be used to promote experiences that are monetised in another medium, like movies or TV shows. However, many VR creators believe that, ultimately, the future lies in new, homegrown franchises built for the platform. "You need to be extremely flexible with what IP can do in order to be able to make the best quality product," says Penrose's Eugene Chung. "That's why, when you see the emergence of new artforms, you see the dominant IP be stuff that is usually new."

"WITHIN VR THERE ARE GOING TO BE AN INCREDIBLE VARIETY OF OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY AND TO DEVELOP BUSINESS AND TO REALLY DO INTERESTING THINGS"


ARDEN'S WAKE
PENROSE
STUDIOS











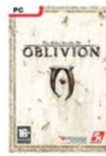






























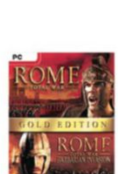




P L A Y I N G T H E

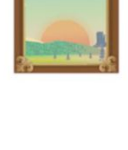
















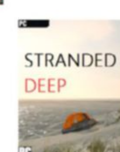


Can anything challenge Steam's dominance of the PC game market?



By Alex Wiltshire

















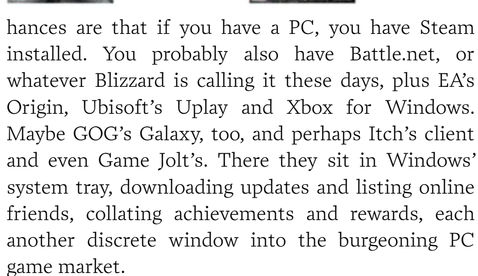








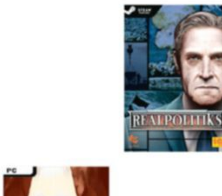




Chances are that if you have a PC, you have Steam installed. You probably also have Battle.net, or whatever Blizzard is calling it these days, plus EA's Origin, Ubisoft's Uplay and Xbox for Windows. Maybe GOG's Galaxy, too, and perhaps Itch's client and even Game Jolt's. There they sit in Windows' system tray, downloading updates and listing online friends, collating achievements and rewards, each another discrete window into the burgeoning PC game market.





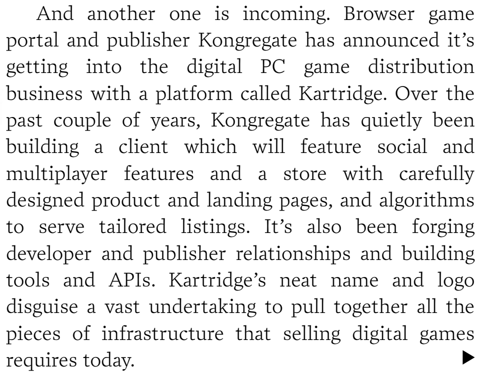












And another one is incoming. Browser game portal and publisher Kongregate has announced it's getting into the digital PC game distribution business with a platform called Kartridge. Over the past couple of years, Kongregate has quietly been building a client which will feature social and multiplayer features and a store with carefully designed product and landing pages, and algorithms to serve tailored listings. It's also been forging developer and publisher relationships and building tools and APIs. Kartridge's neat name and logo disguise a vast undertaking to pull together all the pieces of infrastructure that selling digital games requires today. ▶



















M A R K E T S
THE WITCHER
JUST SURVIVE
STICK FIGHT THE GAME
HAND OF FATE 2
WARGAME
WAR THUNDER
Plague Inc
NO MAN'S SKY
NIGHTMARES
BORDERLANDS 2
PILLARS OF ETERNITY
BRITANNIA
SNIPER ELITE III
INFAMOUS MACHINE
STORIES UNTOLD
LEFT 4 DEAD 2
WARHAMMER
LEGO STAR WARS
GUN
THIMBLEWEED PARK
WOLF AMONG US
THE WITCHER 2
TRIALS FUSION
INQUISITOR
NIGHT IN THE WOODS
SUNLESS SEA
JUST CAUSE 3
WOLCEN
THE LONG DARK
Goat Simulator
HOLLOW KNIGHT
MAFIA
INQUISITOR
DYING LIGHT
BATTLETECH
OURE
TOY STORY 3
Resident Evil
DEAD SPACE 3
DEAD SPACE
DEAD EFFECT 2
HITMAN
SUBNAUTICA
FINDING PARADISE
ORIENTAL EMPIRES
SPORE
CONAN
Don't Starve
PORTAL
EXTINCTION
THE ROOM TWO
GUNPOINT
GOROGOA
PRIMORDIA
Unreal TOURNAMENT
THE FOREST
TO THE MOON
SAINTS ROW THE THIRD
ori
Dust
CELESTE
The Last Door
botanicula
SOMA
TRINE











And why? Kartridge is a new attempt to challenge Steam's utter dominance of the market. "We haven't seen a situation where there's really been a partner that has anything like the levels of Steam's audience and sales potential," Devolver Digital cofounder **Nigel Lowrie** says, explaining that its PC-based games are overwhelmingly being purchased on Steam.

"We want to be a real rival to Steam," Kongregate CEO **Emily Greer** tells us. "We are aiming to be the significant number two. We want it to be a meaningful platform to both players and developers." Kartridge is a bid to catch up with Steam's 15 years of continual development, to create a platform that can operate at something approaching the peak five terabytes of data per second that Steam delivers and to build an audience which can hold a candle to its daily peak of 16 million concurrent logged-in users.

"We know it will take years to build a platform," Greer continues. "This is not something you can expect to launch and have overnight success with. We need to build it up over years, and we have the patience and wherewithal and understanding to do that." But more than that, she points towards the range and variety of digital marketplaces which exist in Steam's huge shadow, such as Humble, Itch and GOG, as well as Steam key resellers including G2A and Green Man Gaming. Think also of Twitch Prime and Humble Monthly, subscription services which dole out bundles of games each month. "That's quite a bit of activity in a market where one platform is so dominant. This is a really hard thing to compete against, but we have a lot of advantages."

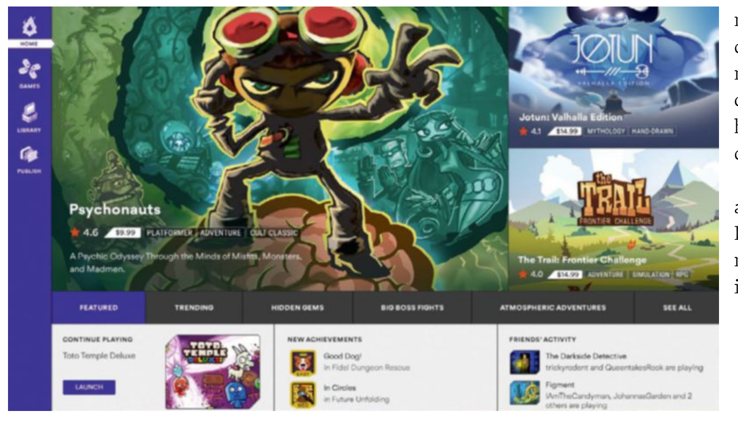
It's a noble project. Steam's near-monopoly on digital game distribution means that it defines the way PC games are found, bought and played. The changes it makes to the way new titles are accepted into its stock and how their store pages are presented can have profound effects on any publisher or developer's fortunes, for better and for worse. Look, for example, to Steam's decision to open its store to any seller in 2017, which has led to a massive influx of games, opening opportunities to some and clouding the success of others. Or look to the effects of Steam's prominent integration of user reviews, which have launched countless flaming developer-forum threads about how a "mixed" review can burst a game's fortunes, of how ratings change over time and how to maximise them, of how they affect Steam's listings, and of the disastrous impact of review-bombing campaigns.

"In any business, if you rely too much on one area for sales, all your eggs are in that one basket," Devolver's Lowrie says. "As a publisher we look at multiple platforms, but looking straight at PC, yeah, it's a concern. Right now we have a wonderful



Kongregate's new storefront, Kartridge, is designed to push artwork, screenshots and video to its customers, giving publishers visual control over their games' pages as well as the platform's social elements

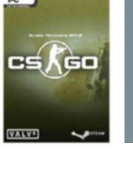






NETFLIX FOR GAMES

The concept of an all-you-can-play subscription game service is well-worn but still unproven. Gaikai/OnLive-style game streaming will always be beholden to the quality of a player's connection, while it's hard to see publishers being comfortable granting subscription services the latest big releases the whole concept relies on. Moreover, Devolver's Lowrie is worried that the model is actively unfriendly to anything other than big games, because they're monetised on a per-play or per-minute basis. "It could really damage smaller games," he says. "For smaller games it's harder to crack $10 worth. I think there's something to à la carte, eat-all-you-want service, but frankly, that's not something we would like – I don't think it's good for smaller publishers and developers."















> "IF YOU RELY TOO MUCH ON ONE AREA FOR SALES, ALL YOUR EGGS ARE IN ONE BASKET"

relationship with [Steam] – and this goes for any partner – but if they get sold and terms change, or the way they do business changes, what kind of products they're looking to sell, that's a variable we can't predict and it's out of our control. We've got to make sure we understand that if it was to go away, are we still able to survive as a company?" For Devolver, and any publisher or developer, the more viable marketplaces there are, the more healthy a position they are in, because they have choices.

The challenge in building alternative marketplaces, however, is enormous. Kartridge has to be more than simply better than Steam. It has to prove to both players and publishers that this particular new challenger is worth their time and effort. It has to lure players from their Steam friends





lists and existing libraries of games, many of which are hooked into Steam Workshop's additional libraries of user-created mods and extra content. Publishers, meanwhile, have to be convinced that supporting yet another platform makes business sense, from revenue splits which should be more appealing than the 70/30 Steam offers, and store design which should feel like it favours their games. Managing multiple storefronts is surprisingly difficult and demanding, from the need to create bespoke content such as descriptions and precisely tailored images, to keeping abreast of statistics and managing communities.

Kongregate, of course, has experience in all of this. Kongregate.com was opened in 2006 as a socially driven home for browser games, an open platform which invited developers to post their ▶



Emily Greer, CEO of Kartridge maker Kongregate







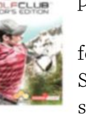
Itch's pages are aimed at giving publishers flexibility over how their games are presented, with control over colours and fonts so they look native to the game

"ONE OF THE FOUNDING PHILOSOPHIES WAS THAT THERE WAS NO WAY TO BROWSE GAMES"

works and presented them to its wide audience. It has a large existing userbase of "several million", has long understood content curation, is well practised in moderating user chat and other social interactions, and is used to paying a revenue share to many thousands of game makers. For Greer, the whole concept of building a PC games marketplace was a natural step onwards for a company which has always been about giving independent developers a space to release their games. "It started after our ten-year anniversary," she says. "We had a day event and I did a history of Kongregate and I was asked, if money was no object, if we could do anything, what would I do? And the answer I gave spontaneously was, 'Build a PC platform.'"

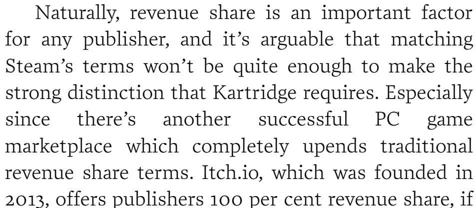
Leaf Corcoran, founder of Itch

That was in 2015. The following summer, Kongregate started actively exploring the concept, and then began building Kartridge at the end of 2016. Greer is keen to make clear that it's not a reaction to Kongregate's browser-game business dying. Though it's declined a great deal since the heady days of 2009 and 2010, she says it has stabilised as HTML5 technology has matured. Revenue was up 50 per cent last year. And it's not that Kongregate's explorations into publishing haven't been fruitful. The free-to-play *Adventure Capitalist* and *Stormbound* have done well on iOS and Android, and on Steam it's successfully launched *Realm Grinder* and *Animation Throwdown*, which are also free-to-play, as well as premium games including 22Cans' *The Trail* and *Super Fancy Pants Adventure*.



Kartridge's exact terms and design are still being finalised, with it entering open beta in summer this year, but its fundamentals are about flexibility. No fees or approval are necessary for listing a game; it supports free-to-play, pay-what-you-want and premium payment models; and product pages display large images and offer control over layout. When it announced Kartridge, Kongregate indicated that its revenue share terms would be Steam-standard, with developers taking 70 per cent, though in an effort to encourage early adopters and smaller studios, games uploaded before the end of October would return 100% of revenue up to the first $10,000 they earn, reverting to 70/30 from that point onwards.





Naturally, revenue share is an important factor for any publisher, and it's arguable that matching Steam's terms won't be quite enough to make the strong distinction that Kartridge requires. Especially since there's another successful PC game marketplace which completely upends traditional revenue share terms. Itch.io, which was founded in 2013, offers publishers 100 per cent revenue share, if they want it. Just as consumers can pay what they













want on Itch, publishers and developers get to choose their terms too, though they default to ten per cent. "They generally leave it there," **Leaf Corcoran**, Itch's founder, tells us.

Itch offers a direct counterpoint to Steam. Both platforms have developed organically, but while Steam has always been resolutely commercial, balancing the needs of both publishers and players to maximise its earnings, Itch has always resolutely supported developers, specifically indie developers, and is only really interested in earning enough to keep going. In fact, it never set out to be a marketplace. It started out as a way for Corcoran to list games he'd made for the Ludum Dare game jam, and as he built it he realised it might be of use to other creators, providing each game with a landing page inspired by the digital music marketplace Bandcamp and enabling sales with PayPal integration. "I had no intention to build it out into a big thing," he says. "One of the founding philosophies was that there was no way to browse games; you'd just have a page up and you'd be responsible for sharing among your friends, and if they wanted to give you money, they could." But as more people used it to post their games, he realised that Itch was providing a valuable service to smaller indies and decided that since more people were visiting the site, it might as well start to show off other games in which they might be interested. From there it's steadily evolved into the full-featured marketplace it is today.

Being so developer-focused, Corcoran has put a lot into making the process of managing games on Itch as streamlined as possible, and it's widely seen as having the best developer tools in the business. Butler is a command-line tool which in single commands allows developers to upload their games and manage updates, comparing versions and generating patches which only contain what's new. "I still see tweets to this day, like, 'Ah, this is great, it's so simple and it just works'. We want to find more stuff like that to implement," Corcoran explains. Steam's tools also perform these functions but not as fluidly, and they aren't open source, either. In fact, Kartridge will be using some of Itch's tools in some form. Corcoran: "All the projects I've worked on have been open source. A lot of the effort in making software is not just building it, but keeping it running and bug fixing too. Making it open source is a good way of getting people involved. I don't see it as competitors coming in to steal it."

Itch has carved out a home for indies making small-scale and niche games. Like them, it's less interested in commercial business than simple and characterful distribution of games, and understands that administration and management are a barrier to creativity. And it works: the game engine GameMaker recently asked its users which platforms they prefer to publish on, and while Steam came first, with 72 per cent of responses including it, Itch took second place with 47 per cent (Humble took third with 25 per cent and GOG 22 per cent).



The trouble, of course, with being so developer-focused is that while Itch's library is growing fast, now numbering around 100,000 games, its customer base hasn't increased at the same rate. Indeed, in the same GameMaker survey, only one per cent of GameMaker's users said they buy the majority of their games from Itch. Not that Corcoran's particularly fussed. Without any investors to pressure him to make bank, he actively discourages and prevents large companies from publishing their games on Itch, so they won't steal the limelight from indies. He merely has to ensure Itch continues to support its staff, which is two full-time engineers and four part-timers.



Co-founder of Devolver Digital, Nigel Lowrie

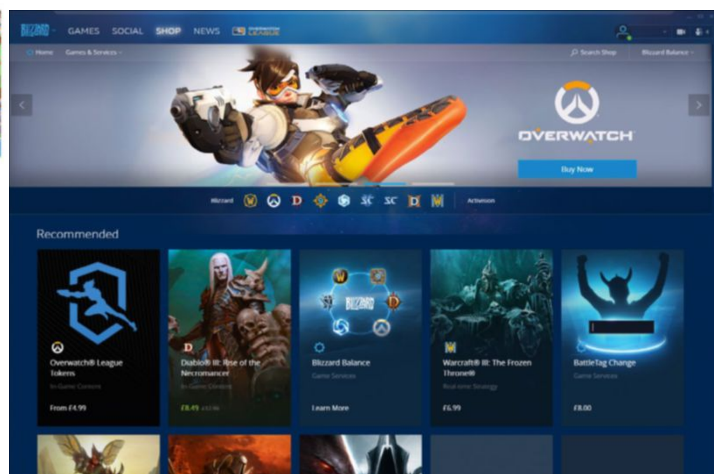
But despite Itch's niche approach, Corcoran has found himself being compelled to follow some of Steam's conventions as it's grown, and since Steam Direct opened the doors to its audience to indies. "Steam is a cultural precedent. People want Steam features," he says. "Things like APIs for achievements and scores and online networking, for the longest time I was like, 'I don't want to do this because it's something Steam does', and I brushed them off. But over time stuff like this has become more and more important." He wants to avoid developers having to make a different version of their game for Itch, using alternative ways of supporting Steam-powered features or ditching them entirely. Valve recently open-sourced some of its networking APIs, a move that will help ▶



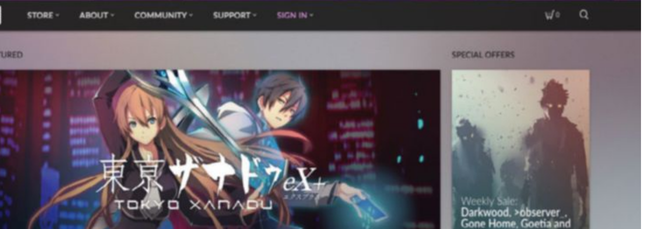
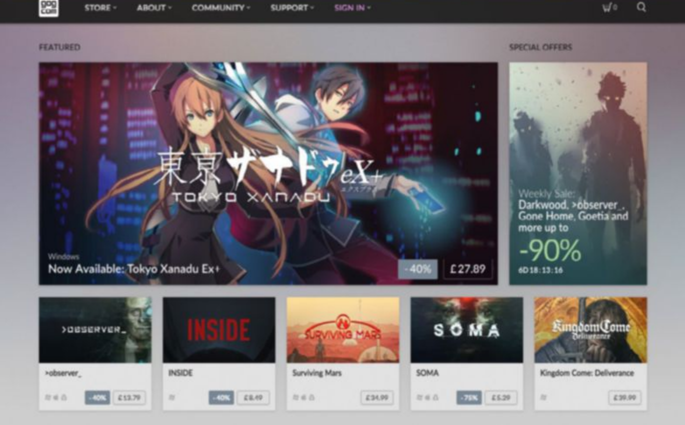


Blizzard's storefront is, of course, devoted to Blizzard games, so it emphasises their large rosters of downloadable content as well as news on and insights into their communities and development







GOG's USP is DRM-free games and an emphasis on consumer rights, which other storefronts including Itch and Kartridge also support, but being the first major one, GOG is the best-known



developers support more platforms more easily.

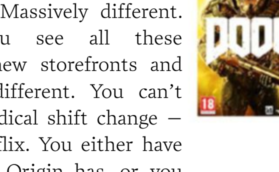
Kartridge also has to make charting the gulf between platforms easier for developers. Making its games DRM-free helps, because DRM adds a layer of extra faff, and its APIs are aimed at finding parity with Steam's to minimise the changes required to support the two platforms. It won't perform complex networking features such as matchmaking at launch, but the aim is to steadily add them as Kartridge matures. Still, it will have its own quirks. It won't have achievements, because Kongregate has other ideas – "a platform-wide metagame," in fact, an evolution of the badges and levelling up that's part of Kongregate.com.

In general, Kartridge hopes to plough a middle road between Steam and Itch, at once indie-friendly and player-focused, and aims to fuse these principles into one with its social features. "Building a community is one of the most important ways of building a lasting business," says Greer. Lowrie agrees: "Being able to communicate with existing customers by sending community hub messages is immensely valuable. A new thing we've been taking advantage of is being able to stream directly to the Steam page, where customers can watch gameplay and dev streams live in the same place they might purchase the game." But with community comes the additional pressure of abuse. "That's a hard problem," says Greer. "I can't promise that we'll make it perfect, but we have experience with moderation in open chat, and we can help keep it down."





Kongregate's plans for Kartridge all seem thoughtful and consider real issues for both players and publishers, but it's hard to know if they're really enough to send it on a path that will see it passing Itch, GOG and Humble, and far enough on to take that "significant number two" status it's aiming for. "You have to have something that brings something genuinely new," says Lowrie. "Massively different. What's weird is that you see all these announcements made about new storefronts and they're not doing anything different. You can't predict it but it has to be a radical shift change – things like iTunes, Steam, Netflix. You either have to have exclusive content like Origin has, or you have to have a delivery method like Netflix's streaming that's radically different and a huge leap forward. Otherwise, why would anyone care?"







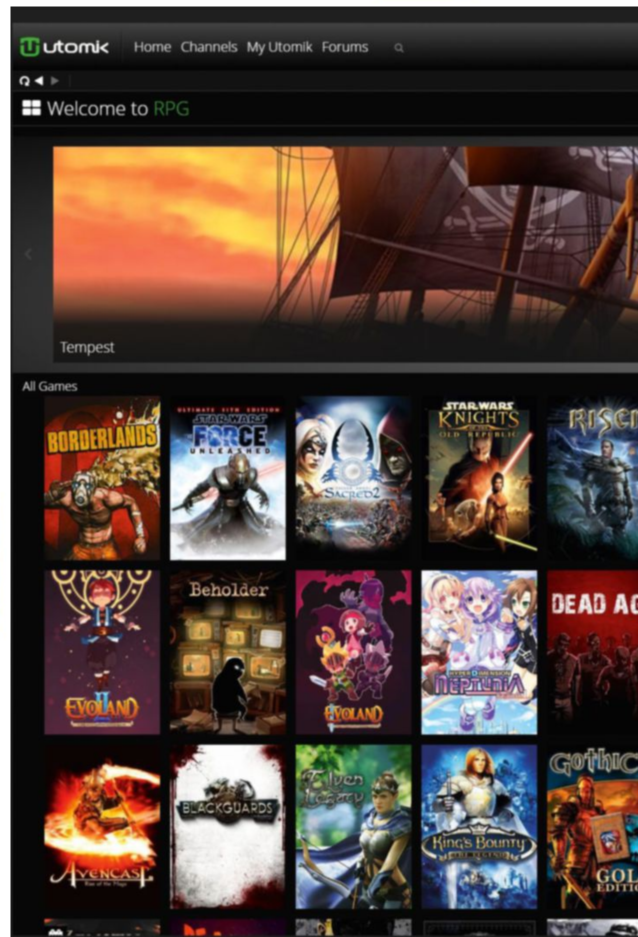


Just such an attempt at a radical shift change is Utomik, a subscription-based digital PC gaming store. For £4.49 a month you get to download and play any of the games in its 750-title library. "For us, the opportunity is to help bring the gaming industry to where music and video are today," founder and CEO **Doki Tops** tells us. This isn't a streaming service, which is an old promise for radical shift change which still hasn't fulfilled its potential, despite the efforts of recent attempts such as Nvida's GeForce Now. Utomik-delivered games are installed, but its client makes them playable as early into the download as possible.

In launching Utomik, its team has faced the two big challenges that all new platforms face, of making it easy for developers to integrate its features ("I called it the billion-dollar question," Tops says) and of attracting publishers. But both are scaled up as a result of Utomik's unique nature. "It took a lot more time than we wanted to explain the business model and convince publishers to put a part of their portfolio on our platform," Tops admits.













Its model was new, and for some publishers it's taken two years between first contact and signing contracts. And its roster is decidedly antiquated: at present it features no new releases, instead offering older favourites such as *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Borderlands*, *Metro Last Light* and *Lego Star Wars III*.

On the other hand, Utomik's library is eclectic, featuring many casual and kids' games. "Right now I think we are the only gaming platform that has a split of 40 per cent female and 60 per cent male," Tops says. "It's so gratifying to hear that some people never heard of *Borderlands* and then try and love it. The same goes for a lot of the indie games that get discovered." This is where Utomik's real promise exists. In not following Steam's model, it's able to access new audiences for whom Steam's traditional purchasing model is a barrier – not to mention its hardcore gaming look and atmosphere.

Kartridge has something of the same idea, seeing itself as a market less about hardcore games than wider indie games. "We made a lot of choices in terms of making the platform feel open and inviting to a broad class of gamers, a very different feel to other platforms," says Greer. "I hope my 76-year-old mom, who plays on Kongregate.com, will come across." But it's not going all the way to something like Big Fish, which specifically caters to the casual PC gaming market, instead aiming itself at taking a portion of the market Steam has already carved.



Greer isn't afraid to admit that Kartridge is a risk. But she says it's been planned with that in mind and believes Kongregate can absorb its failure, partly because its existing businesses are doing well and partly because last year the company was bought by vast Swedish digital media conglomerate MTG. Another way to look at Kartridge, however, is that it might not be risky enough. Kongregate.com's revolutionary move in the mid-'00s was to add a social network to Flash gaming. There's a sense it's not applying the clarity of that vision to PC gaming in 2018. But it's easy to note lack of vision. Quite what might constitute a radical shift from Steam, one which can meaningfully challenge its dominance and perhaps surpass it, is another matter. "Smarter people than me will figure out the next big thing," says Lowrie. "If I had a better idea, I'd be doing it." ■





Doki Tops, CEO and founder of Utomik

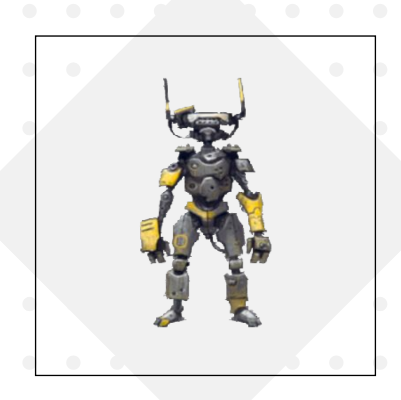
"YOU HAVE TO HAVE SOMETHING THAT BRINGS SOMETHING GENUINELY NEW"

Utomik's games roster isn't up to the minute, but its focus is on Netflix-like accessibility. Games are seamlessly downloaded as soon as you click on them and are playable surprisingly quickly

CLIENT SERVICES

Getting users to install clients is a significant hurdle, a boring step that's yet another thing to log into and which may hog their PCs' resources. Some clients are necessary to download games, like Steam, Battle.net and Origin. Others like GOG and Itch don't require installation, so there's less of a barrier to simply buying a game, but as an illustration of the challenge they then face in convincing their customers to download their clients anyway, Corcoran says that only ten per cent of Itch's downloads originate from its client, and that many users don't know it exists, despite nags about it appearing on download screens. Kartridge has all of this ahead, too. No matter how easy it makes the process, it can't expect Kongregate.com's large existing userbase to simply hit 'download'.

THE MAKING OF...



THE SIGNAL FROM TÖLVA

How human and post-human intelligence powered a singular sci-fi adventure

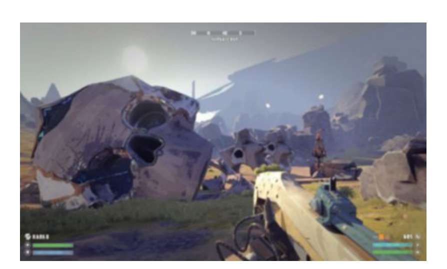
By Chris Schilling

Format PC
Developer/publisher Big Robot
Origin UK
Release 2017

The Signal From Tölva is slow, cerebral science fiction: a game of careful, measured exploration punctuated by loud, intense bursts of combat with the robot factions that roam this beautifully desolate world. A conversation with Big Robot's **Jim Rossignol** is equally thoughtful and similarly studded with lively interjections. One minute he's speaking quietly and intelligently about his game and then suddenly he becomes more animated, perfectly vocalising the weighty crunch that sounds when your robot avatar lands from a jump. When talking about its combat, he emphasises a single word in a way that even emboldening, underlining and italicising it wouldn't quite do it justice. If games are reflections of their creators, there's an awful lot of Rossignol in *Tölva*.

At first, it seems like a direct response to the studio's previous game, horror-tinged 'tweedpunk' shooter *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*. Its world is handcrafted rather than procedurally generated. Its art is of a significantly higher standard. And while *Tölva* also has hostile elements, its setting is designed to provoke curiosity rather than fear in its players. Yet the idea had been kicking around for some time longer, Rossignol explains, sparked by his love of the *STALKER* series, and the affection of fellow designer James Carey for the heavy simulations of the *Arma* games. "It evolved quite a lot as we went along in development but we knew that we wanted to do something like this," Rossignol says. "There are very particular concepts and images that have always been important to me and James, like that classic open-world idea of AI doing its own thing, where you'll come over a hill and see a battle that you can just watch or intervene in or ignore. The sense of life and dynamism that gives was the fundamental thing we wanted to explore."

The autonomy of *Tölva*'s AI is one element that has survived from the very early conceptual stages, before work had even been completed on *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*. The robot factions can, Rossignol says, go pretty much anywhere in the world; they will set out on missions of their own volition, scanning artefacts and getting involved in skirmishes against rivals as they explore, often travelling significant distances as they do so. Not for nothing has Big Robot patched in a launch option called Tourist Cam, which lets the world keep running while the player hovers above it unseen, watching the AI go about its business.



***Tölva*'s only generative element in its grass. "We have to give a nod to the *Garry's Mod* guys for that," Rossignol says. "They showed us how to generate grass on the fly because Unity's own vegetation system just wasn't powerful enough"**

"I love that because it's like a sort of metanarrative to the whole thing – all these little missions that robots perform that the player might never see because they were heading the other way or they just missed it," Rossignol says. Remove the player from the equation and the world happily ticks along as if nothing was missing: robot groups will fight alongside one another, kill one another, capture and lose territory. That the player comes to feel more like a disruption to a well-ordered set of systems, he says, is entirely deliberate. "That's the fiction of the game too, right? You're not the robots that are running around on the surface, but some unknown entity that is logged into the network. Which is exactly what you are as a player: an outside agent within the computer simulation. I really like that as an analogy – taking what you are actually doing and turning it into a story."

> "THERE ARE VERY PARTICULAR CONCEPTS AND IMAGES THAT HAVE ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT TO US"

With a foundation in place, Rossignol began looking for help to realise his vision, hoping to marry the kind of distinctive aesthetic that made Big Robot's debut stand out with much higher production values. In other words, he needed an experienced concept artist. To which end, he approached two friends in the comics industry – Jamie McKelvie and Kieron Gillen – with a simple request: "I asked both of them who drew the best robots." McKelvie suggested illustrator Ian McQue, but Rossignol wasn't optimistic about convincing him. "I looked Ian up and realised that he worked at Rockstar so obviously there was no way he'd work for a tiny indie and didn't think much more of it." Six months into development, he chanced his arm and contacted McQue, who had since left Rockstar to pursue a broader range of art projects. To Rossignol's evident amazement, McQue said yes.

"Obviously his work is absolutely brilliant," Rossignol enthuses, but the concepts McQue supplied faced him with a problem. "There's a real sense of loss, I think, between the concept art of games and what they actually end up looking like when they're dropped into a standard rendering engine with a bunch of texture artists working on them. We were wondering how we could capture the painterliness and the splattery textures and the interesting shapes that Ian produces." Rossignol brought 3D artist Olly Skillman-Wilson on board to discuss how best to process McQue's work in a way that captured the essence of it in-game.

There were, he says, two possible approaches, the first of which was prohibitively expensive for a company of Big Robot's limited resources. So rather than a bespoke renderer, Skillman-Wilson conceived an art-derived solution instead. "Olly came up with a neat way of creating textures that captured the splatteriness of Ian's stuff, essentially by using the same brushes that Ian uses in his actual imagery and then mapping that to the same kind of shapes and silhouettes in the world," Rossignol explains. "Given the rendering limitations, that's as faithful as we could possibly have been to his art."

And that art ended up changed how *Tölva*'s world was built. "We had this idea that it should be [like] highlands from the start," he says. "I think when you make these games they end up having a kind of grimdark feel to them, because that's where the language of science fiction has gone. But the whole of *Tölva* skewed much lighter – McQue's imagery is not 'heavy' in any sense." As a result, the concepts informed a range of decisions about the game's direction that might otherwise have gone very differently. One of the biggest, at least in an aesthetic sense, was *Tölva*'s dynamic day-night cycle. "If you're doing a moody, atmospheric science-

fiction game you might as well set it at night or in the dark because you're going to save on the lighting budget," Rossignol adds. "And I think *Tölva* looks good at night because you get all the light flashes of beam weapons facing off against each other. But the bright colours and blue skies and stuff in McQue's art made me realise we had to have [daytime] to capture that."

It also had an impact on the game's rhythms. Big Robot's initial impulse was to focus the game on the territory-capture elements and the accompanying robot-on-robot combat. To an extent that remains: you must still claim bunkers that serve as spawn points. But discussions between McQue and Rossignol prompted Big Robot to push more towards exploration and investigation, with mysterious relics, ruined spacecraft and more scattered across the rocky environments. "There was no sea-change point but just the fact of the conversation that you have between an artist of that calibre, and then also trying to take on board the visual style of the work that they've done, ends up changing things enormously." It changed things in smaller ways, too. Sometimes it was as simple as spotting something within McQue's designs and extrapolating on what they might mean in *Tölva*'s world: quadruped landers, for instance, that ended up functioning as guard spawns. "I don't think it changed anything radical about the overall design, but grabbing something as small as a sketch and then finding a way to do something with it definitely changes the overall experience players get at the end of it," Rossignol says.

If *Tölva*'s visuals got as close to McQue's concepts as Big Robot could reasonably have imagined, it was the sound that sold the physicality of their presence. There is a sense of weight to everything from the combat to the walking animation, and Rossignol puts that down to an 11th-hour audio pass that proved unexpectedly transformative. Sound designer Michael Manning had previously produced a video imagining an overhaul of the sound effects on *Sir, You Are Being Hunted*. Impressed, Rossignol returned to him, spending what little budget he had left to rework *Tölva*'s sounds. "One of the things I'm particularly pleased about is when you jump and it makes a kind of *cwwumph* noise: that completely sold the weight that we put into the camera springs and suddenly it felt robotic."

Indeed, one of the real joys of *Tölva* is the audiovisual impact of its combat: its fizzing lasers boast heat- and air-distortion effects, while the crackle and snap of shots landing make it feel thrillingly violent. The sounds, he says, were partly inspired by Doug Liman's Edge Of Tomorrow: "Getting hit throws up a real slap of metal on metal or of kinetic ablative energy on metal: I absolutely love that stuff. It's weird how in some games gun combat is relatively muted – like it's the most violent thing that could possibly happen, where you've got these super-fast projectiles whacking into stuff. Some games seem to almost downplay that and I just don't get it." In fact, he believes *Tölva* doesn't go quite far enough in that regard: "I'd like it to be even more vicious – have you ever seen District 9? The first time he sets off the alien gun, it's just *ludicrously* violent – BLAM! – you've got this massive distortion, horrendous noise and it completely eviscerates someone. That's how science-fiction weaponry should be, right?"



Jim Rossignol
Lead designer, The Signal From Tölva

***Tölva* seems to have different reference points to most other sci-fi games.**
Everyone in our studio has interests outside games that they connect stuff to. Like, the reason Ian's science fiction art takes on a look of its own is because he bases it all on real machinery. He draws diggers and ships and cranes and then he mixes their shapes and profiles and colours into science fiction [designs]. You can see the shapes of old-fashioned trawlers stuck into these weird hover ships.

There's a sense of 'oldness' to the game's weapons: they might be future tech, but they're not exactly shiny and slick, are they?
Yeah, they feel *used*. That also comes from Ian's stuff – and also from handling tools. When you're handling tools that are used regularly, like drills and axes and hammers, they're never slick and polished. And that's all these weapons are to these robots, right? They're a bunch of tools for doing stuff. The beam weapon came from Ian using a leaf blower in his garden. I forwarded him a picture of an aircraft and he ended up using it. So it's actually like a jet engine held in a leaf blower position: a sort of mish-mash of real-world tools.

What was the thinking behind the expansion?
We produced a lorebook for *Tölva*, which I wrote with Cass Khaw, and we used a bunch of McQue's concepts and then some other work of his to illustrate it. And I wanted to expand on that side of things. I'm interested in the idea of post-human intelligence: what would it look like, and how much would it still need to lean on human structures? Would it even seem rational to us in what it did and what it was interested in? It's just a little story about that, basically.

The challenge of getting *Tölva* looking and sounding just right enforced significant delays in the development process, particularly the technical difficulties with rendering McQue's art across such vast open spaces. And while ultimately Rossignol believes that's to the game's benefit, certainly in terms of the unique aspects of its visual language, it may have had a negative impact on the game's commercial performance. "We were unlucky in the sense that loads of sci-fi stuff hit at the same time, and everyone's exposure to *No Man's Sky* meant there was a level of fatigue into that kind of pastel-y sci-fi imagery," he says. "I think if we'd have released six months earlier as we'd planned to, we probably would have been in a slightly better place.

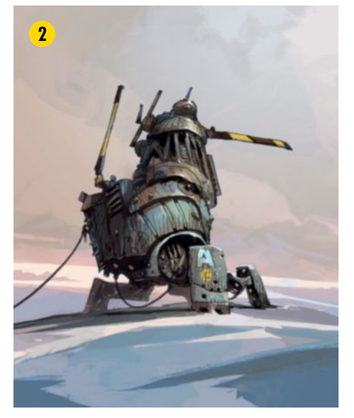
"It's funny how people's expectations get set up. Because I had an enormous number of people say to me, 'Oh, it looks like *No Man's Sky*, and I didn't like *No Man's Sky* so I'm not interested'. And I'm like, 'It's so *nothing like No Man's Sky* in any way'. But that's the way human brains are when it comes to recognition – trying to connect one familiar thing to something else."

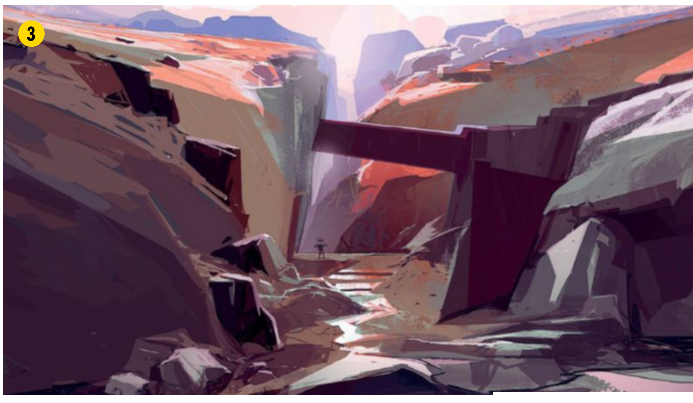
Rossignol concedes that the game's pre-release trailers didn't manage to fully articulate the experience of playing the game – but also accepts it's the kind of game you can only really appreciate through play. "*Tölva* probably has a connection to what my wife would call boring games but I prefer to call 'slow' games. *Spintires: Mudrunner* is a recent example – that's one of my favourite games of the last several years. You've got a bunch of games like that now, where not a lot happens and the pace is relatively downbeat but they're incredibly satisfying. I hope, at least to some people, that's what *Tölva* is."

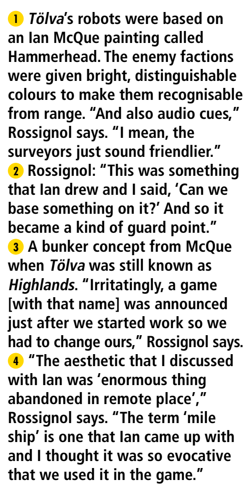
A recently released bonus campaign won't, he reckons, be the new lease of life that *Tölva* deserves. "I think we're just going to trundle along as a cult game," he says, but it's clear he's proud of how it turned out. "Chasing after all our goals at once wasn't straightforward. But I think we got there and it was a relief to see it come out and for people to say, 'Wow, that does look really good'. When you get that kind of response from people, it makes all the time and effort worth it." ■







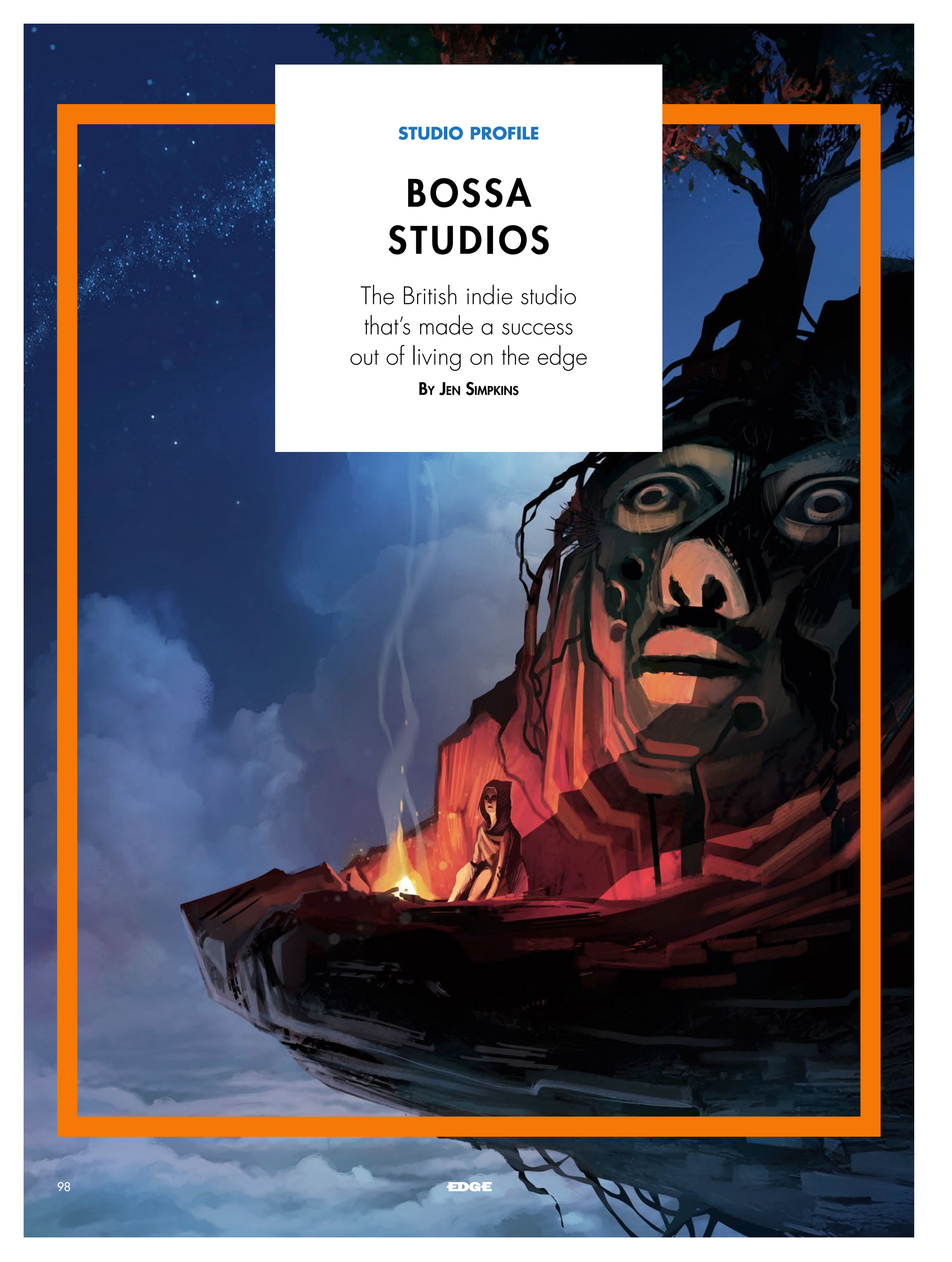




1 *Tölva*'s robots were based on an Ian McQue painting called Hammerhead. The enemy factions were given bright, distinguishable colours to make them recognisable from range. "And also audio cues," Rossignol says. "I mean, the surveyors just sound friendlier."
2 Rossignol: "This was something that Ian drew and I said, 'Can we base something on it?' And so it became a kind of guard point."
3 A bunker concept from McQue when *Tölva* was still known as *Highlands*. "Irritatingly, a game [with that name] was announced just after we started work so we had to change ours," Rossignol says.
4 "The aesthetic that I discussed with Ian was 'enormous thing abandoned in remote place'," Rossignol says. "The term 'mile ship' is one that Ian came up with and I thought it was so evocative that we used it in the game."
5 "Each shot from a weapon produces three sounds: an intro noise, a firing noise and then a kind of cooloff noise, and they're all structured within the game logic," Rossignol explains.
6 3D artist Olly Skillman-Wilson used McQue's designs to build the weapons, though his original models proved to be a bit too much for the game to handle







STUDIO PROFILE

BOSSA STUDIOS

The British indie studio that's made a success out of living on the edge

By Jen Simpkins



Founded 2010
Employees 85
Key staff Imre Jele, Roberta Lucca and Henrique Olifiers (co-founders), Luke Williams (game designer), Chet Faliszek (director)
URL www.bossastudios.com
Selected softography *Monstermind, Surgeon Simulator, Thomas Was Alone, I Am Bread, Decksplash (cancelled), Purrfect Date*
Current projects *Worlds Adrift* + TBA

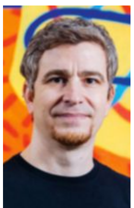
You'd think that, if you were leaving your cushy job to start your own studio, you'd be confident in making it work. But Bossa Studios was built on the assumption that it would fail. "We said, 'Look, we're going to go bankrupt – there's no question about that'," co-founder **Imre Jele** says. "'So how can we have the maximum amount of fun, and impact, before we go bankrupt?'"

He'd met **Henrique Olifiers** at Jagex – Jele was heading up *Runescape*, Olifiers unreleased sister project *Mechscape* – and the two had run out of excuses not to start their own company. Olifiers knew **Roberta Lucca** from his time at Brazilian TV broadcaster Globo TV, who with her broad entertainment industry experience was a great fit for the founding team. 2010 was proving fatal for many studios; Jele figured Bossa would have to survive about six months in order not to look embarrassing. The first title they designed was *Monstermind*, a realtime, "anti-social social strategy game" in which Facebook users could ruin each other's cities by unleashing hordes of B-movie creatures. A year-and-a-half, one game and one BAFTA in, Bossa Studios was suddenly looking very unembarassing indeed.

"Multiplayer was the way to go," Olifiers says. "We said, 'This is going to evolve into something bigger. But it didn't.'" Social media games were on the decline, and Bossa's founders were keen to try something new. "I'd like to consider we're fairly creative people, and decent game designers," Jele says. "A normal company would have said, 'Okay, [the founders] choose what games we make'. But we said, 'No, our job is to create an environment where other people can be creative.'"

Bossa's breakout hit *Surgeon Simulator* was the result of Global Game Jam 2013, to which a carefully selected group of four employees were sent in the hope they'd return with something exciting. Among them was design lead **Luke Williams**, who hosted the group at his flat: its location opposite the jam, and sleeping and bathing facilities, surely gave them the edge, Williams says, while they put together the bones of what would become Bossa's biggest-selling title. "We thought it was funny because we were just sleep-deprived, and it was stupid," he says. But as they watched roomfuls of people laugh while fumbling to complete a heart transplant in the physics-based scenarios, they realised they were onto something.

Thomas Was Alone creator Mike Bithell was about to leave the studio to start his own


Founders Imre Jele, Henrique Olifiers and Roberta Lucca bring a wide range of media-industry experience to the table

company. Before doing so, he sent a message on Twitter to YouTube sensation Felix 'Pewdiepie' Kjellberg about this hilarious new surgery game. "Pewdiepie made a video that day," Williams says. "By the end of Monday, I was just staring at Twitter and refreshing it, like, 'What is going on?'" Williams may have been surprised by the sudden success of their prototype – but secretly, this was the very situation that Bossa's founders had hoped to engineer.

Not that they didn't have their reservations about the game itself. "We had a moment where we looked at that game and said, I think

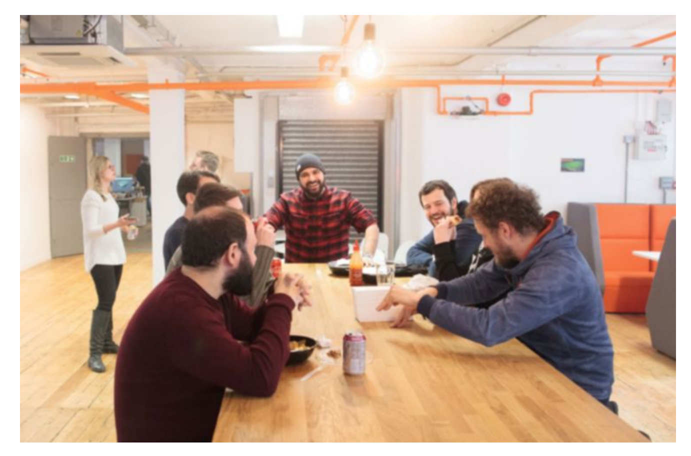
"WE SAID, 'NO-ONE IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD PUT MONEY BEHIND THIS TO MAKE IT HAPPEN... SO WE MUST'"

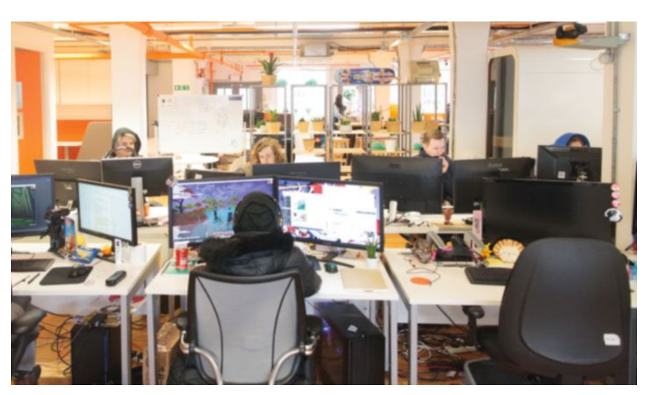
the actual words were, 'This game is completely stupid'," Jele says. "'No-one in their right mind would put money behind this to make it happen… So we must.'" He laughs. "It wasn't just, 'Oh, let's do something crazy'. There was no other game like this – and how often do you look at a game and think that? Every year it becomes harder to say that. So when you see it, you can't not act on it." Resources were shifted, and the game finished and released on Steam in just two months: "We thought, 'No-one will give a shit if we don't have something for like, two years," Williams says.

Nowadays, this might seem like obvious practice, but at the time it was a risky move, with no real guarantee that virality sold games (2013 horror game *Slender: The Arrival*, for instance, made very little money). But with YouTube on the rise, Bossa's rare willingness to change tack at a moment's notice, and Lucca directing a highly focused marketing initiative, *Surgeon Simulator* sold millions. "There is always wisdom behind the madness," Jele says. "We say the *Surgeon* team was four people – the *Surgeon* team wasn't four people. It was everyone at Bossa. We just deliberately didn't talk about it."

Lucca weighs in: "You need a great game to have a great marketing campaign. But, that said, I think this was the start of our culture of game jams." They became a regular occurrence at Bossa, despite the expense: the founders set a theme, and people split into groups and come up with ideas. Even when nothing is ultimately produced – around nine out of ten jams are write-offs, Olifiers estimates – it's considered a valuable use of company time. As Bossa grew, more confident young programmers would arrive, only to be brought back down to earth by some disastrous jams after they'd used up their one precious game idea on their very first – and become more spontaneous and inventive as a result. "It became so ingrained in our culture that people could feel very at ease to fail, because creativity comes from failing multiple times," Lucca says.

But Bossa's next hit, *I Am Bread*, was seemingly a dead cert, cut from the same viral-friendly cloth as *Surgeon Simulator*. It cast the player as a slice of bread that must become toast, seeking unlikely heat sources on which to grill itself. Again, the idea was the result of a selectively themed jam for "clumsy simulators", Olifiers says. It wasn't simply an overt attempt to recreate the success of *Surgeon Simulator*, we're told – *Bread* simply came from the same minds who "were just wanting to dick about again," Williams says. "We were well aware of telling the same joke twice, or something like that," Olifiers admits. "But we put a video ▶





Following a large investment, Bossa spent nine months last year searching London for space to expand – only to eventually open up the doors to the adjacent room in its Shoreditch office block. The 'Bossa orange' on the pipes was an impromptu last-minute decorative touch

out, went home, and by the time we got home it was already clocking half a million views. It was everywhere."

Again, Bossa enjoyed widespread success. A later attempt to ease back into the multiplayer market with team-based skateboarding game *Decksplash* proved less fruitful: while 98 per cent of Bossa's games are cancelled at the validation stage, *Decksplash* made it through, a fun *Splatoon*-alike that had attracted a decent following. "A lot of people liked it, but not nearly enough to make it viable," Olifiers says. *Decksplash* was dependent on matchmaking: not enough players downloaded it during its free week, and the company was unwilling to release a game that might die mere weeks after players had purchased it. "If I look back, for us as a company, it was a mistake because we should have killed it earlier. But this is also part of our culture – we don't hide behind things. We failed." Consumers, however, saw the challenge to reach 100,000 players on the free week as blackmail. "People took it as a threat," Williams says. "A lot of the time, if a game gets canned, the team gets fired – but as a studio, we don't do that."

Whether their games succeeded or not, they were pushing Bossa forwards. "The nonsense ideas helped," Williams says. "I think we were still finding our feet. The founders still wanted to create these unique multiplayer experiences – that was where it all started. We took a tangent because that was what was working for the studio. But towards the end of promoting *I Am Bread*, that was the early rumblings of *Worlds Adrift*." Bossa's current and ongoing project, sandbox MMO *Worlds Adrift*, brings together would-be sky pirates to explore floating islands at leisure, building flying ships, battling others and even creating islands themselves. It is a huge undertaking, and tonal shift, for the studio, so ambitious that it was initially shelved back in 2014, after it sprang from a week-long jam. But again, the shift from viral comedy physics games to sprawling MMO was "very orchestrated", Olifiers says, and "part of our strategic mission. We did *Surgeon*, we did *Bread*, and then we said, 'Okay, now we have a war chest – we can be more ambitious. So the theme of the jam was 'games you play as a hobby'." When *Worlds* appeared, Bossa's founders knew they had to hold fire until they found the right technology to make it work in their still modestly-sized studio. Enter Improbable's remarkable SpatialOS.

"We are now 85 people," Lucca says. "So for us the question is, how do we make sure that our culture evolves and scales?" But Bossa has the benefit of confidence in its risk-taking approach, and its founders in its ability to design and manage the "meta-layers" of the studio. "In the beginning, our job was to create an environment where other people can create games," Jele says. "Now our job is to create an environment where our team can create games where *players* create the experiences." Bossa, he says, is planning to open up internal game jams to players in future, involving them in production far earlier. "And now, into that comes the extra layer where you add AI-driven narrative," he continues. "When all that comes together, you create something that is a worthwhile story to be told – but this time, it's the story of development, not the story in the game."

BOSSA'S NEW PROJECT USES ADVANCED AI TO HELP GENERATE DYNAMIC STORIES, LIKE A D&D DUNGEON MASTER WOULD

Worlds isn't a wholly unexpected move for Bossa, perhaps: it's a sort of amalgamation of *Monstermind*'s multiplayer goals, and the physics-based fun of *Surgeon* and *Bread*. "We enjoyed our singleplayer games endlessly," Jele says. "But ultimately, there's much more craziness and much more fun if other people are there." The more the merrier, essentially – and Bossa's headcount is growing too, thanks to a $10 million investment from London Venture Partners. A recent addition to the studio is ex-Valve writer **Chet Faliszek**, who is working on the studio's unannounced project, an experimental new co-op action title that will use advanced AI to help generate dynamic narratives as a Dungeons & Dragons dungeon master would, reading player behaviour and weaving adventures around evolving situations.

And from our discussions with the *Portal* and *Half-Life* writer, it seems Faliszek has found the perfect home in a studio that is, strangely, galvanised by the possibility that it might all go terribly wrong at any moment. "One of the most important things that I said to them early on was, 'We need to try to do something that can fail'," he tells us. "The whole project may be a disaster, but we needed to sign up for something that we didn't put in a bunch of safety nets for. That was really important to me – to bite off something big enough that we could fail at doing it." If we were Bossa, we'd hide the BAFTA in a cupboard somewhere for now. ■



1 Feline dating sim *Purrfect Date* was the brainchild of marketing employees Oliver Hindle and Ruby-Mae Roberts; Bossa published the title.
2 *Worlds Adrift*'s Thuntomites (or 'beetles') are docile, but don't take kindly to players felling trees. The game's manta rays, however, need no excuse to ruin your day.
3 Co-founder Roberta Lucca initially found *Surgeon Simulator* too gory to stomach playing. Ex-Valve hire Chet Faliszek was more bloodthirsty, helping make the game's VR version, but was friendly with Bossa even before that.
4 After the release of *No Man's Sky*, *Worlds Adrift* design lead Luke Williams was concerned about the perception of procedural islands: "As devs, you're sitting there going, 'I'm worried the world doesn't know what procedural means.'" *Worlds*' 1x1 spaces are designed for brief visits; dev- and player-crafted islands also feature.
5 If you're dextrous enough, a rocket found in one of *I Am Bread*'s levels can effectively propel you towards toasty success. Yes, that is co-founder Imre Jele trapped inside



REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle Switch
With the Bowser family dealt with, we head into *Rabbids*' disappointingly uneven postgame. The elegant difficulty curve of the campaign suddenly resembles a sine wave during an earthquake, as insultingly simple challenges are bookended by punishing combat puzzles that demand perfect solutions. And we could have done without having to trek through already-completed worlds, thanks. Still, we persist, thanks entirely to that delightful tactical combat. The *Donkey Kong* DLC can't come soon enough.

Bound PS4
Inspired by our research into *Bound*'s speedrunning capabilities last issue, we return to Plastic's kinetic, balletic 3D platformer hoping to break a few records of our own. It turns out that while some tricks are simple to pull off, others are trickier – such as edge jumping, which requires edge guard to be turned off, and therefore sees us constantly plunging into the blocky waves below like a leaden elephant in a tutu. We'll stick to photo mode, thanks.

Overwatch PS4
Torbjörn's daughter Brigitte has entered the fray, and the tanky Support is only marginally less irritating to play against than her turret-building papa, thanks to her enviable skill set and low cooldowns. If we're not getting booped over cliffs by her flail's Whip Shot, then we're being stunned by her Shield Bash and promptly melted by enemy DPS. But it's worth it to see her single-handedly tear apart the long-stale 'dive' team composition – a dead Tracer is a good Tracer, no matter the side.



Explore the iPad edition of Edge for extra Play content

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



Get out of my way

To Hope County, Montana, the latest stop for Ubisoft's globe-trotting festival of death and flame. *Far Cry 5* (p112) is set in one of the biggest, most beautiful, and most believable game worlds Ubisoft has ever made. It is filled with things to see and do; things you'll want to simply poke around at and explore. Yet you can't have even a moment's peace. If you're not being yanked forcefully into a story beat or set-piece, you're being set upon by infinitely spawning enemies or wildlife. It's a playground, sure, but one that insists you play by its rules, and at its pace.

Sea Of Thieves (p108) takes – apologies in advance – the opposite tack. Rare has built a vast watery playground into which you are dropped with barely a word of explanation. You must work out for yourself how it works and make your own fun. We've had plenty, certainly – but are left with the sense that Rare has gone too far in the other direction to Ubisoft. At launch, at least, this is a beautiful, often brilliant game that's crying out for a few more things to do.



Making games set in big worlds is a difficult task indeed, and it's rare that we find two such different answers to a common problem in the space of a month. Yet in the context of those two games, *God Of War* (p104) feels, weirdly, like a breath of fresh air; a largely linear romp with a defined beginning, middle and end, and few opportunities to get lost or stuck. Yet it also offers a fine reflection of the running theme in this month's Play. Kratos, star of many a linear action game, wants to sprint headlong to the finish. Atreus, his son, fancies straying from the critical path and mucking about. Perhaps the real solution lies somewhere in the middle, but we'd prefer developers to keep tinkering with extremes, even if it doesn't always come off.

God Of War

Conflict is the bloody, beating heart of any *God Of War* game, but within this Norse-themed reboot you'll find a very different kind of battle. It's a tug-of-war between restraint and excess, essentially, informed by the history of the series and its furious protagonist: past form has taught us to expect Kratos to rip apart enemies many times his size with his bare hands (at least when he's not cleaving them in two), and Santa Monica's game certainly delivers on that front. But this also wants to be the tender story of an absent father reconnecting with his son, a coming-of-age tale for one that also represents a maturing for the other. As such, the goal is a relatively modest one. The plot can be summarised as a man walking up a mountain with his son to scatter his wife's ashes. Their journey isn't without its bumps, but it's to the considerable credit of director Cory Barlog and his team that the game's two seemingly incompatible ambitions are so well met.

Attempting to humanise a violent psychopath might at first seem like a fool's errand. As one character points out, Kratos has always been a monster – which seems like a conscious acknowledgement that the developer can't simply press the reset button and pretend events of earlier games didn't happen. Indeed, one standout sequence sees Kratos forced to directly confront his barbaric past for the sake of his quest, leading to an extended cathartic outburst that proves shockingly satisfying. The new Kratos might be slightly more pleasant company, but occasionally it's good to have the old one back. But for the most part, his inner rage is contained, breaking out only when it's most required – and, as such, we see it rarely outside combat situations. At times, you sense the tension within him, stretching like an elastic band that's ready to snap at any moment, but for the most part he's more of a curmudgeon: he's not angry, just disappointed. That disappointment is frequently expressed at his son, Atreus, though as he steadily learns, the boy's failings are, in part, down to his own shortcomings as a parent.

If theirs is a far-from-conventional relationship, their dialogue rings true, with some lines hitting uncomfortably close to home. When a frustrated Atreus yells, "He always leaves! He's never here!" it feels almost autobiographical: a recognition, perhaps, of the strain that crunch can put on a developer's family life. But the distance between them steadily narrows, the frost thawing as, conversely, the climate gets colder. Even as he softens slightly, Kratos can be hard to warm to – we haven't heard the word 'boy' barked this frequently since Born Slippy – but his bluntness provides a rich source of deadpan humour. While he remains taciturn, his son is positively garrulous. Though at times Atreus's dialogue sounds anachronistic ("Ya don't gotta tell me!" he shoots back after his father warns him not to stray too far from his side), it serves to emphasise the distance between the

Developer Santa Monica Studio
Publisher SIE
Format PS4
Release Out now

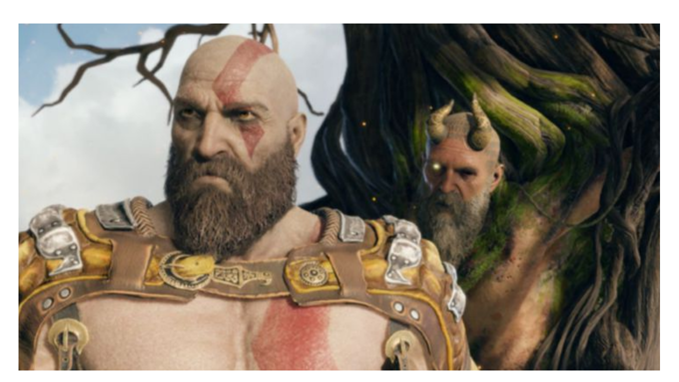
The sense of impact found in previous games' cinematic close-ups and quick-time events are now ever-present



two. And if he seems just a bit too chatty, asking a few too many questions, any parents playing will know all too well just how accurate that is: in that regard at least, Atreus is a typical kid.

Their partnership infuses every element. This is a long way from the game-long escort mission it could have been – anyone familiar with *The Last Of Us* will realise Santa Monica has picked up a few tips from Naughty Dog. As many questions as he might have, Atreus has plenty of answers, too: he's smart for his age, capable of translating lore stones and runes etched into walls. The game brilliantly communicates the tension between the logic of sticking to your objective and the player's natural desire to wander off the beaten track. Atreus, ever curious, seems keen to help those who need it – though you sense his ulterior motive is simply to prolong their expedition, happy that he's finally getting to spend some quality time with his dad. Kratos may lack his son's compassion, but he recognises the rewards that certain distractions might bring: "If we stray from the path, it is only to prepare ourselves for the journey ahead." When Kratos asks Atreus if he remembers the way back somewhere, you sense he's addressing the player as much as his son, helping to reorient those with a poor sense of direction – and who can't rely on a map that's useful only for fast-travelling. And, yes, of course the boy can also fit into narrow crawlspaces and throw chains down for his father to climb up.

After a shaky start while Kratos teaches Atreus how to hunt, the two eventually make for a formidable team in combat – which, let's face it, is what most of us are here for. It has a different rhythm to past entries: the over-the-shoulder perspective partly sees to that, but the Leviathan Axe is naturally slower and heavier than Kratos's traditional chained blades. What little these encounters lose in fluidity, however, they gain in physicality. The sense of heft and impact found in previous games' cinematic close-ups and quick-time events are now ever-present. The kid, meanwhile, darts around nimbly, firing arrows at appropriate targets at your behest – aim before jabbing the square button and you can highlight a specific enemy – and keeping others occupied by grabbing onto their necks, letting you finish them off more easily. Only occasionally, when he attracts a little too much heat, will he be left unable to provide assistance, and even then he's only briefly incapacitated. A few enemy types present a greater threat to his well-being. Small flying pests – a reminder to developers that if a character thinks an enemy is annoying, the player will likely agree – can lift him off the ground, forcing you to save him. But if that sounds like a nuisance, rest assured that it happens so rarely, you won't feel put out; rather you'll experience a mild pang of panic, the boy's yelps hastening you to come to his aid. ▶





ABOVE Atreus's codex details the world's lore, including these shrines to the Norse Giants. In the bestiary, he makes observations about enemies that double as combat tips – a cute if slightly patronising touch



TOP Mimir joins you for a good portion of your journey – once you've cut his head off, at any rate. He's good company, regaling Atreus with stories as you travel, and offering the odd withering putdown – such as when Kratos uses a giant's hammer to smash some ice: "A stealthy plan it is not."
MAIN The giant serpent Jörmungandr is less threatening than he looks, though his voice will give your subwoofers a workout. The controller rumbles every time he speaks, too, one of a number of delightful little details.
RIGHT The violence is brutal but not gratuitous – notably, the camera coyly shifts away from a decapitation – though extended fights can leave Kratos caked in the blood of his opponent (and probably some of his own). In other words, this new instalment doesn't soften him too much



If you've played *Horizon Zero Dawn*, you may feel pangs of familiarity – and not just in its wintry environments. Though the rhythms of combat are very different, Kratos feels oddly similar to Aloy in the way he runs and climbs

You needn't rush immediately into harm's way, either, since the axe doubles as a projectile weapon, which, via upgrades, is later able to target multiple enemies – or weak points on a larger opponent – in a single throw. Indeed, as it boomerangs back to your hand, you might wonder why a game in which Thor is so frequently derided (another travelling companion describes him as "a fat dobber") should hand you a weapon that so closely mimics Mjölnir. It has its uses outside battle, too: inevitably there are hundreds of smashable objects yielding currency to spend on upgrades, and its frost effect comes in handy for the environmental puzzles that bring your quest to a temporary standstill. The solutions to these rarely change – in each case you must temporarily freeze a contraption in place while you're turning a wheel or pulling a chain – but it's oddly impressive how many variants are wrung out of this single mechanic, even if the game's latter half makes the limitations of the idea a little too apparent.

It's not the only sign of a game that's spread just a bit too thinly, as the clock ticks past the 25-hour mark and yet another setback begins to make your trek feel like a Sisyphean task. In fairness, though you'll fight one too many elemental trolls carrying bludgeoning stones that eventually prove their undoing, it's hardly wanting for enemy variety, while its handful of side missions are more involving than you'd expect. Yet an understandable keenness to provide value for money leads to some palpable pacing issues, with one significant character shift disappointingly fumbled as a result. And as you're later whisked to unexpected places, it begins to feel slightly overstretched. One optional realm offers nothing more than arena fights; another simply requires you to loot chests while battling within a toxic mist, remaining as long as you dare before emerging with your haul while you can still draw breath. The game hardly needs more, but promising new locations without properly following through leaves a slightly sour taste. Likewise a post-credits sting which appears to be little more than a DLC tease, undercutting a disarmingly low-key, elegiac ending.

Still, whenever the pace starts to sag, the visuals comfortably pick up the slack. *Uncharted 4*, *Horizon*, step aside: PS4 has its new best-looking game. Sony's firstparty output has always been polished, of course, but this is technically unimpeachable – and beyond that, it offers one of the most distinctive visions of Norse mythology we've yet encountered. As a spectacle, it arguably reaches a peak in Alfheim, with its crepuscular light, ornate architecture and translucent bridges; a further creative flourish casts its Dark Elves as a kind of insectoid hive, their spears jabbing at Kratos like surrogate stings. A striking third-act vision of purgatory, meanwhile, is unlike any hellish realm you've seen before.

And that's without considering the audacious formal flourish of the entire story playing out in a single shot. It's a stylistic risk that gives the action a feeling of raw spontaneity – even if the game's admirable commitment to its conceit means that exposition has to cover for events that might otherwise have occurred in flashbacks or cutaways. Instead, it keeps you with Kratos and Atreus for the duration. Sure, the prospect of spending 30 hours with gaming's grumpiest anti-hero and his bratty kid might not sound like fun, but by the time the pair have finally completed their exhilarating, exhausting journey, you'll be delighted you joined them.

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DWARF STARS

Continuing the theme of familial dysfunction, your upgrades come courtesy of two feuding brothers. Each time you locate a new shop you'll see either Brok and Sindri, dwarven blacksmiths who can boost the power of Kratos's axe with nothing more than a quick tap of their hammers – though each complains about the other's handiwork. The coarse Brok is almost as cantankerous as Kratos, while Sindri is a germaphobe, tentative about handling anything dirty even with his gloves on. They'll chat with Atreus while you shop, and they also offer some of the game's more substantial side missions. While it might seem odd to encounter them in every realm, there's an in-fiction excuse for their ability to move so effortlessly between them.

Post Script

How God Of War (nearly) solves the modern action game's biggest problem

Back in **Edge** 291's Time Extend, we suggested that an action game with the wild variety and perfect pacing of *Resident Evil 4* could never really happen again. That might sound like a defeatist attitude, but it was tinged with optimism: we weren't exactly daring developers to match it, but we hoped that someone might try. Two-and-a-half years on, and we've still not had reason to revise our opinion. It says much for *God Of War* that it's come closer than pretty much any other game to changing our mind.

Even so, we found it hard not to wince a little when we hit the Options button and saw the map screen – not least since doing so calls a premature halt to the game's idea of a single, continuous take. Alongside a top-down view of Midgard is a checklist, with 11 categories of objective to complete. These range from 'favours completed' to 'artefacts found', 'mystic gateways located' to 'Odin's ravens killed'. There's also 'Realm tear encounters', and that's a wake-up call, too: our first sees us reach into a void, which conjures an enemy that kills Kratos with a strike we couldn't reasonably have seen coming. A tip on the (thankfully brief) loading screen that follows isn't exactly encouraging: "A purple health bar indicates a powerful enemy," it says. "Purchase or discover better equipment to improve your chances." In a game that works so hard to communicate Kratos's raw power, it's incongruous to see him collapse to a single sucker punch.

The same goes for the shops. Where before you'd collect orbs to expand Kratos's combat repertoire, now you also have to think about upgrading his chest, wrist and waist armour, as well as the pommel of his axe and even all-in-one armour sets for Atreus. As your gear is upgraded, you'll slot enchantments into their sockets, affording you extra perks. Move over to the skill tree and you've got 14 close-combat and nine ranged abilities for the Leviathan Axe alone. At least these have a tangible impact in battle; likewise the kit that reduces your cooldown times for Kratos's light and heavy runic attacks, whether you're using them to devastate a single opponent or clearing some space while inflicting frost or fire damage. Otherwise, the effect merely amounts to your own HP meter depleting slightly slower or your enemies' demise being hastened by increments – or, in other words, the quality of your gear is more important than your skill with the axe. There will, no doubt, be someone who manages to finish the game without buying any upgrades or improving their weapons. But the process of whittling down those health bars will turn a thrillingly dynamic combat system into a war of attrition.

All this is par for the course with modern action games, but it's also part of a dangerous obsession with size



To a point, all this is par for the course with modern action games, which the market demands must now contain RPG elements, crafting systems and loot. But it's also part of a dangerous obsession with size. When *God Of War* director Cory Barlog explained that it had taken one of the game's system designers 43 hours to achieve 100 percent completion – the average player, unfamiliar with the game, would surely be looking at 50 hours minimum – he reminded us that a game's bulk rather than its depth has become one of its biggest selling points. In a market where singleplayer-focused titles have to compete with service games and multiplayer-centric, microtransaction-funded blockbusters, you can understand the importance of creating a perception of value. But there's a sense that publishers and platform holders are making a rod for developers' backs with such a keen focus on volume over quality.

Even so, *God* *Of War* suffers far less than most from such bloat. Your eyes may roll when you first find another new type of artefact, but you'll soon realise they're merely categorised by region: around the Lake of Nine, you'll find ship's heads; among the mountain's peaks it's ornate cups, and the boundaries mean that finding them all isn't like hunting a needle in a haystack. And you'll soon realise that those individual regions of Midgard are bigger than most of the other realms you'll visit: that to-do list seems more imposing than it is. It's helped by the fact that even Midgard is no free-roaming sandbox. There are various ports to row to, but its stretches of water are relatively narrow, subtly guiding you towards new shores and docks where new adventures await: not every distraction is unique, but you can guarantee you'll find something more than a bog-standard fetch quest. Upgrades to Kratos's health and rage meters are found in chests that require a bit of thought to reach. And when it's time to cash in and buy those legendary pauldrons, you'll find its dwarven shopkeepers aren't merely faceless vendors, but memorable characters in their own right.

As a result, *God Of War* has a sense of purpose that's lacking in many of its peers. So it's a pity Barlog's boast should focus on length when his game has so much more to brag about. It might ultimately feel like a compromise, caught somewhere between a linear action game and a sandbox RPG, but it's conclusive proof that scale and craft needn't be mutually exclusive. At a time when quantity seems to have taken precedence over quality, *God Of War* suggests we might just be able to have both. ■

Sea Of Thieves

Being an adult is boring. No child dreams of being an accountant when they grow up – they want to be astronauts, superheroes, or, indeed, pirates. Rare is trading on this nostalgia with swashbuckling multiplayer adventure *Sea Of Thieves*. At present, it feels more like a toy box than a fully fledged game, a basic collection of lovingly hewn playthings designed to push players towards each other. It's wet behind the ears: sometimes frustrating in its obvious immaturity, other times all the more refreshing for it.

Everything in *Sea Of Thieves* has been designed around the idea of potential. Rare's astonishing visual metaphor for it stretches in all directions, not just an admirable feat of programming – each wave perfectly synchronised across each instance to allow every player equal visibility and opportunity – but an incredible artistic achievement. You can practically taste the stuff, lapping placid and turquoise over the shores, or drawing itself up haughtily into steely grey walls during storms. It is friend and foe by turns, more convincingly alive than any other body of videogame water.

Simple elements are thoughtfully constructed and given room to breathe. Take the two ship options, for example. The galleon is a many-cannoned vessel designed for larger crews. You'll need someone downstairs to man the map and shout up instructions while you drive, probably a third adjusting the sails, and perhaps a fourth for repairs. The sloop, meanwhile, is a vulnerable but speedy craft that can run rings around a galleon in capable hands. Everything onboard is quickly accessible to a crew of just two – or even a lone pirate, should you wish to sail solo (canny players will quickly discover a clever bit of design that allows them to check the map without rushing away from the helm).

But what is remarkable about *Sea Of Thieves* is that you won't often want to. From our experience, it's one of the friendliest multiplayer games around, and there's no denying that Rare has engineered it. The sight of a pirate goofily playing a hurdy-gurdy can win over even the most bloodthirsty stranger, as they put away their pistols and instead pull out concertinas, melodies automatically harmonising. Kegs of grog everywhere lead to bonding sessions as we drink our fill with wary new companions, only to send them into fits of laughter as they watch us careen about. And then there's the loot itself – best dug up and transported with the help of skeleton-bashing bodyguards – and shared equally between the crew, meaning working together pays off.

Fighting other crews is a mixed experience. We're playing pirates, after all, and pirates are traditionally scumbags. All loot is physical, so a haul is never yours until it's cashed in at an outpost. It can hurt when you're robbed of your spoils – but now that an update has stymied griefers (see 'Aye, patch'), unfair is fair. A good two hours of raiding a high-value skeleton fortress for its key and its loot can be undone by two nippy sloops and a stowaway holding a gunpowder barrel, and we're speaking from painful experience.

But thank goodness for the things that go wrong, because when everything goes swimmingly, it can be dull. Beyond the 'message in a bottle' sidequests, the optional lootable shipwrecks and the occasional Kraken encounter, there are just three basic kinds of voyages – fetch quests, really – that don't develop beyond adding more steps as you level up factions, and, infuriatingly, don't scale rewards accordingly. The Gold Hoarders' exploration-based puzzles are the most entertaining, offering maps marked with crosses indicating buried chests, or procedurally generated rhyming riddles that have you scuttling around islands searching for clues. The flavourless combat-based bounty hunts for The Order Of Souls are more efficient, but regular skeleton mobs provide little challenge (although the elemental weaknesses of tougher fortress guards take some determined teamwork to beat). And while rounding up, transporting and taking care of animals for The Merchant Alliance quests can produce hilarious results, they demand so much time and so many resources that they rarely feel worth it if you want to progress.

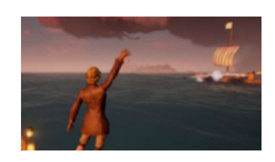
Presumably in a panic to stretch out the hours required to reach Pirate Legend status, Rare has evidently jacked up the numbers on levelling, and the prices on a tiny pool of cosmetics with little regard for the consequences. Full-time streamers have taken over 200 hours to reach the level cap of 50. That's with a fair wind in their sails, and very little of what actually makes the game *fun*. As more people become Pirate Legends and share voyages with others, power-levelling may reduce the grind; for now, the whole thing feels actively prohibitive. Progression is clearly designed to be a side-effect of mucking about, and eking out any traditional sense of reward is unenjoyable – no matter how fancy the endgame outfit or secret hideout may be.

By design, *Sea Of Thieves'* greatest stories happen out on the open ocean with other people, in the liminal spaces where players are given just enough simple, quality tools to get creative with. It's more D&D than *Destiny*, really, and should be regarded as such. But Rare's neglect of the points they happen between is an issue. The main idea, it seems, is that the real treasure was the friends we made along the way – and, incredibly, Rare has taken that naive platitude and made it genuine. But there's a nagging sense that, caught up in the childlike magic of this anecdote generator, it hasn't fulfilled *Sea Of Thieves'* potential to its fullest. If the game is to flourish, Rare must develop the basic structures that compel modern players to return even on the days when nobody gets kidnapped by the Kraken. Sooner or later, we all have to grow up.

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Developer Rare
Publisher Microsoft Studios
Format PC, Xbox One
Release Out now

Thank goodness for the things that go wrong, because when everything goes swimmingly, it can be dull



AYE, PATCH
There's a difference between piracy and cheating, of course, and Rare has been quick to address issues. The first two weeks of launch saw a high number of people abusing respawns. Crews would often sink themselves to reappear at the nearest island with healing bananas and ship supplies replenished, meaning they could freely camp outposts and extend fights around skeleton fortress raids with no real consequences. Thankfully, a patch has since fixed the problem by making sunken ships respawn farther away. It's a sign that Rare is continuing to listen to the game's community as promised, as are the scrapping of plans for a 'death tax' that would charge gold for more 'avoidable' deaths, and the inclusion of a Reddit-suggested 'day one patch' – a numbered eyepatch cosmetic, naturally.

ABOVE Islands are often beautiful, but can feel empty without a riddle to follow. Some have secret caves hidden behind foliage, though, and strange shrines to study – and we've heard legends of a few completely uncharted islands.

RIGHT Roleplaying as rascals is a surefire way to create a bond. Here, we improvise and team up with another solo pirate to steal a parked galleon. Total gold pilfered: 2,360. The four-man crew's howls of horror as we sail off: priceless

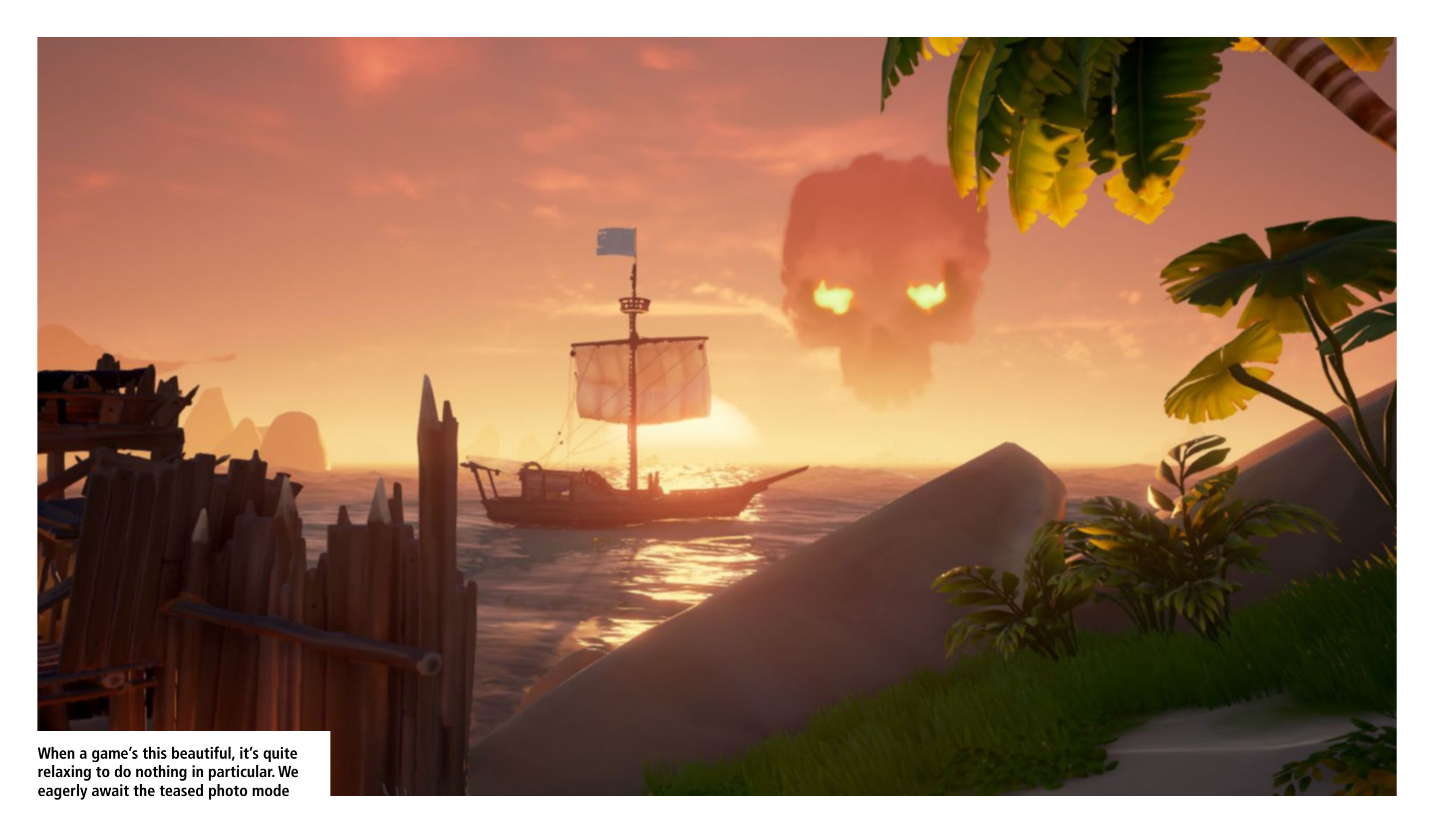


BELOW Skull clouds indicating live skeleton fortresses draw players together. The key is a physical object too, and can be stolen by others: thanks to proximity chat, loose lips can often sink ships





ABOVE Not all chests are buried: some spawn randomly on islands. This Marauder's Chest is a decent find, but cursed chests that flood your boat or make you drunk are generally where the real money – and fun – lie



When a game's this beautiful, it's quite relaxing to do nothing in particular. We eagerly await the teased photo mode

Post Script

How equitable is a world of pure imagination?

When you're a kid, with all the time in the world and no money, making your own fun is paramount. Fast-forward ten or 15 years, and the situation changes: you're time-poor, but at least have the means to conjure up some form of pre-packaged entertainment to give your weary brain some mild relief from the real world.

There is nothing quite like a *Destiny*, a *Monster Hunter* or a *Call Of Duty* to serve this. These games, as *Destiny* series designer Luke Smith has observed, are like golf: a relaxing hobby built around repetition and mastery, satisfying feedback and reliable outcomes. Shoot the alien with the right gun, and the numbers tick up. The rules, honed by years of gaming history, are set in place for you. Abide by them, and you'll be rewarded.

Forty quid or so, it seems, is now regarded as one's sporting club membership fee. For that much money, a player expects that a certain service is provided – at least a few dozen hours of curated missions to work through, and an overarching framework that can funnel them as efficiently as possible into feeling good. Developers are professional creators: the onus to create is on them.

Sea Of Thieves is one of those 40-quid titles that suggests otherwise. Rare has always been open about this. It's a multiplayer game reliant on player interactions, and the stories they generate: the pirate simulator is the playground, and Rare's job is to babysit.

The playground could certainly be better stocked with playthings. But *Sea Of Thieves* has attracted a level of ire online comparable to the outcry over Hello Games' barebones space sim, earning the nickname 'No Man's Sea'. There's just not enough *content* for their money, players declare – before cancelling their free Game Pass trial, opening Steam and pootling around *PUBG*'s Erangel map for the thousandth time, hoping to find another tall tale to tell down the pub.

We're poking fun, but they've got a point. Not everyone is inclined to roleplay, or use in-game mics, or think creatively after a long day – it can seem too much like hard work. An imaginative outlook makes the difference between a miserable half-hour in the player-mandated brig, or an opportunity to play the fool and come away with a funny story. Two hours of a skeleton fortress raid, ending in a key being stolen by opportunists, is either your personal idea of hell – or, in our case, our best-ever *Sea Of Thieves* session, culminating in an unforgettable ocean chase and unexpected new friendships. Sailing aimless and solo, forgoing voyages to listen to music and cash in any curios you find washed up on the shores, is either boring or the perfect way to spend a meditative evening (and is almost exactly how some of us enjoyed playing *No Man's Sky* for hours on end).

The reviewer's dilemma is obvious: how do you stick a useful score on a game that is purposely riddled with fillable blanks? Is the expectation that a player exercise imagination for a game to work as intended a fair one? Should every game offer equal-opportunity fun for all? Someone who dislikes turn-based strategy games wouldn't expect a turn-based strategy to appeal to them; perhaps the same is true of the genre of games where 'close your eyes and believe' is something of a mechanic.

It's a niche genre, but an expanding one. The question must always be whether these games provide sufficient means to get creative – and, perhaps, are equipped to convince a generation that has unlearnt the organic 'play' of childhood, now well used to the neatly packaged, button-activated, sport-like structures of many modern titles. *Sea Of Thieves* has a way to go (it could start with putting back all those mysteriously vanished beta cosmetics). But in the age of podcasts, and Twitter, where you're so busy consuming others' thoughts that you're rarely in tune with your own, perhaps these games can remind us what 'play' truly means. ■

Far Cry 5

Oddly for the latest in a series which once asked us about the definition of insanity, *Far Cry 5* is a game that asks you to do the same thing over and over with broadly similar results. Wherever you head in Montana's Hope County after completing the tutorial, you will clear out and recapture outposts. You will free hostages being held at gunpoint, or being transported by road. You will blow up trucks carrying the militia's fuel, and loot the ones filled with goodies. And along the way you will get into all kinds of ludicrous scrapes powered by a morass of gameplay systems bashing, unfettered, into one another. There are some wearyingly basic attempts at providing variety – in one zone, you'll shut down the militia's operation by taking out trucks; in the next it is boats; in the third, helicopters – but you'll soon see through the facade. This is a game that hopes that being able to do what you want will make up for the fact that, whatever you choose, you will have to do it a dozen more times before you can see the credits roll.

The map is split into three zones, each ruled over by a Herald from the Seed family which leads the Eden's Gate cult. John, based in the southwest, is cut from the same cloth as Joseph, his brother and the cult's leader. His gang specialises in converting sceptics to the cause using baptism and/or drowning. In the mountainous north, Jacob is a militant headcase who wants to breed fighters, not followers. And in the ludicrous east, Faith prefers intoxication to indoctrination, creating an army of super-strength grunts using a drug, Bliss, that transfers the user's consciousness to another, more beautiful realm while their real-world body staggers around the place looking for heretics to pulverise.

The result is a game that is simply too over-the-top to seriously attempt anything resembling social commentary, and in fairness it would have been highly out of character for an entry in this series to seek to do so. The publisher's latest hatstand Rambo simulator just so happens to be set in the American midwest, and apart from the odd throwaway reference to Trump-era politics, this is just another game whose story is the set dressing for a playground full of miscreants that you can kill how you choose.

And kill you will. This game's trick is the Guns For Hire system, which allows you to bring two AI-controlled allies into the fray. An airplane pilot provides strafing and bombing runs, while another will lend you their helicopter, and a bow-wielding hunter works silently from the shadows. There's a dog called Boomer, a cougar named Peaches, and a bear named, obviously, Cheeseburger. Unless your partner's in the air, they'll be able to revive you when you fall in combat (Boomer, sweetly, licks your face). At its best, the Guns For Hire system lets you liberate an outpost without firing a bullet. At its worst, it risks undermining the flow of *Far Cry*'s delicious combat – one of careful stealth until you get spotted, followed by a rapid escalation until everyone but you is dead, and everything is somehow on fire.

That, presumably, is why Ubisoft seems unable to let you have a moment's peace. When some of the local wildlife sets upon you as you trek through a forest, it's fair enough. But down by the roadside, when a second patrol comes along before you've even finished dealing with the first, and is soon joined by a third, and a fourth, and then a grizzly bear shows up, it's just too much. The only way to guarantee yourself some peace is to fill that resistance meter, take on the local kingpin and kill them – at which point that part of the world is only of use to completionists. So you head off to the north, or west, or east, where there's another bar to fill, another silly gimmick to suffer through, another road network patrolled by endlessly spawning goons.

Such design issues are a natural consequence of Ubisoft's desire to drop you in a world surrounded by systems and see what happens. Yet the structure of the thing is built by hand, and too often a problem. A rejigged perk system requires that you complete challenges, rather than level up, to expand your abilities, meaning you'll need to mix up your loadout, racking up kills with each weapon archetype. But the relentless action makes it hard to leave your comfort zone – shotgun, rockets and sniper, since you asked – leaving you feeling like you're being inefficient, despite using the best tools for the job.

There are technical problems too. While it's a beautiful world, the audio's all over the place, particularly when it comes to dialogue, the mission-critical NPC in front of you sometimes drowned out by others yards away. And the game repeats its predecessors' crime of mapping looting a corpse and taking its weapon to the same button; you'll go on an emergency ammo run in a firefight, then jump back into the fray to find that your lovingly customised sniper rifle is now a barebones SMG.

The result is a game that is frequently almost, but never quite, the game you hope it will become. It is too stressful to be enjoyable, its world too dangerous to safely explore, its story too dumb to take seriously. By the time you reach the third zone, you know exactly how it's going to go. You'll fill a progress bar by a third by blowing up and killing the same things you've been blowing up and killing for the past 20 hours; you'll be captured, will have the local herald's brand of cod-religious BS explained in a set-piece, then rescued, and off you go again, killing and freeing and wondering how fires got started until it's time to take on the boss. It's a game that shows that emergent systems are all well and good, but still need a careful designer's hand, and a thrilling structure beneath them. A fire extinguisher wouldn't go amiss, either.

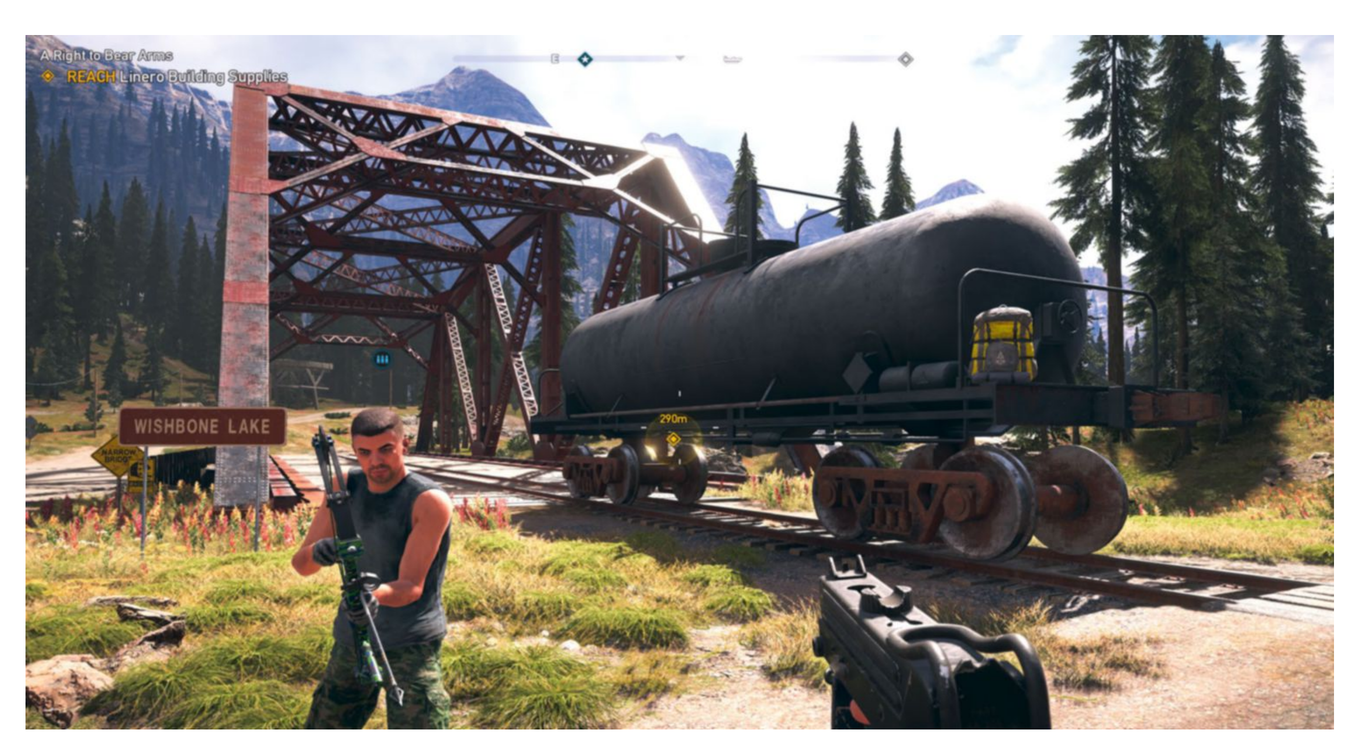
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Developer/publisher Ubisoft (Montreal)
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

It is too stressful to be enjoyable, its world too dangerous to safely explore, its story too dumb to take seriously



SILVER SKINS
With the new perk tree letting Ubisoft cast aside previous *Far Cry* games' 'kill three crocodiles, carry more rockets' crafting system, there is still wildlife trying to kill you, and Ubisoft needs to reward you for surviving their attentions. As such, animal skins can now be sold off at any shop for princely sums – which is vital in a game with dozens of guns, attachments, vehicles and clothes for sale. Other collectibles can also be flogged off, and while the pricing seems to have been knocked up in an afternoon by a seven-year-old, we're not about to complain. We've long maintained that magazines should cost $150, and validation, however overdue, feels sweet indeed.







ABOVE Arcade mode allows you to create your own levels via a powerfully flexible suite of editing tools. Ubisoft's example levels (including 'Upside Down', pictured) provide a fair amount of inspiration to get you started

MAIN As expected from Ubisoft, this is an extremely handsome game, especially in its Xbox One X guise – although you may want to consider sunglasses when transitioning from dark indoor sections to the piercingly lit outdoors if you're playing using a TV with potent HDR capabilities. ABOVE You should always be playing with partners, whether they're from the animal kingdom, one of many locals eager to get their hands dirty, or, ideally, a real-life co-op companion. Be warned, though: the game is at its glitchiest when multiple fights are kicking off simultaneously in the same area. RIGHT *Far Cry 5* delivers a good amount of traditional bullet-based and throwable combat options, but in a game filled with hunting activities a stealth-friendly bow feels like an appropriate tool to keep by your side – especially once you've invested in some upgrades



A Way Out

Developer Hazelight
Publisher EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One (tested)
Release Out now

Well, now we know why *Brothers* was wordless. Josef Fares' second game as director shows he certainly knows how to point a camera, but it also demonstrates a tin ear for dialogue. Where the fable-like story of his previous game kept shtum, *A Way Out*'s characters don't know when to shut up: an entertainingly varied thriller about two prisoners on the run becomes a low-rent B-movie whenever anyone opens their mouth. Its story leaves few clichés unturned, and while it sustains a robust pace, it's studded with moments of ill-judged, tension-sapping humour. Fares may have made it clear he's not a fan of the Oscars; in truth, his script has more chance of a Razzie.

Pity, as *A Way Out* demonstrates a rare and impressively thorough commitment to a lost art: the splitscreen co-op game. A second player, either from your friends list or sitting beside you, is mandatory. The story begins in medias res: gruff, goateed straight-arrow Vincent and mutton-chopped hothead Leo are talking inside a prop plane, having made their escape. You and your partner pick a character each, and the game then flashes back to their first meeting, as Vincent arrives to begin a long sentence for embezzlement and murder, with Leo already six months into his stay for armed robbery. Before long, the pair, conveniently placed in adjacent cells, discover they share a common enemy and begin to plot their escape.

Across three dozen chapters, this amounts to a smorgasbord of simple, short-form activities that run the gamut from driving sequences to foot chases, stealth set-pieces to gentle environmental puzzles and even some mildly amusing twoplayer minigames. In both tone and structure it's oddly reminiscent of Wii cult favourite *Disaster: Day Of Crisis* minus the meteorological catastrophes. It's similarly uneven, and the script is fantastically knuckleheaded in both cases, but they share the same ace in the hole: variety.

During the opening scenes, that naturally means more of a focus on stealth. There's a series of chapters that amount to an amusingly long-winded retrieval of a chisel, ranging from one that requires a distraction, to a bout of laundry basket smuggling which sees one character hiding underneath a pile of sheets as the other wheels them along. These sequences are at once well-staged and silly: there's a certain tension as you pass the tool back and forth through the bars during a spontaneous cell inspection, though it raises serious questions about the level of security – indeed, an earlier handover reveals a hilarious flaw in the prison's design.

By now, you'll likely have accepted that this isn't exactly Shawshank and you may well find yourself, against your better instincts, simply going with it. One post-breakout episode, as the pair infiltrate a farmstead to obtain a change of clothes, about sums it up. As the two crouch behind a fence, the camera cuts to show the farmer and his wife, who just so happen to be watching a news report about the prison escape. Stifle your chuckles and what follows is rather enjoyable. Here, as on a handful of other occasions, you must agree on your approach. The more level-headed Vincent suggests getting the old couple inside out of their home by opening a nearby barn and setting their horses free. Leo's preferred option is to head inside and subdue the couple: there are a few points of entry, offering different ways to distract or separate the farmer and his wife. *A Way Out* is at its best in these moments, where you're co-ordinating and executing a plan together. Yet they're a little too few and far between.

It demonstrates a rare and impressively thorough commitment to a lost art: the splitscreen co-op game

Still, even when it resembles an own-brand *Uncharted*, it all rattles along at a decent pace, while the dynamic presentation gives it an unusual flavour. Depending on the situation the action may be split horizontally or vertically, and not always evenly: you'll even occasionally share screen space with other characters, as in a pursuit involving the world's least efficient hitman. A virtuoso set-piece in a hospital sees the action briefly go fullscreen, the camera taking a sinuous path through doors, windows, vents and grates, even shifting between floors as control passes between Vincent and Leo – culminating in a brief side-scrolling beat-'em-up interlude that plays as an appealingly shonky tribute to Park Chan-Wook's Oldboy.

On occasion, the presentation creates its own problems: you'll have to agree to engage in conversations separately since otherwise dialogue will overlap (although perhaps that's for the best). Sometimes, one player will unwittingly trigger a cutscene, curtailing whatever the other was doing at the time. And the stylistic tricks essentially mask the fact that what you're doing is fairly basic. That's fine, of course: this is a game that seems designed to be accessible to less experienced players. But then they may well need shepherding through a late-game episode, where the game suddenly decides to abandon its non-lethal principles to become a sub-*Kane & Lynch* cover shooter.

It's symptomatic of a game that never quite finds a level of consistency to fully engage you. A range of minigames that echo the sillier side activities of the *Yakuza* games – presumably included for their potential social-media share value – all seem to come at the wrong time, and self-referential comments from the leads about their inappropriateness don't quite excuse their presence at what should be dramatic highlights. Then again, perhaps it's just that expectations set by Fares' debut are being subverted by a follow-up that simply wants to entertain. In that light, the director's Game Awards rant feels more like a mission statement: fuck the Oscars, switch your brain off and just enjoy the ramshackle ride.

6



FARES FARE
Treading as lightly as we can, a certain plot development introduces a shift in the partner dynamic that leads to one of the game's most inventive set-pieces. It also helps to explain a few story contrivances – though it also seems to make less sense the more you think about it. Yet the game's overwrought finale feels unearned: alas, neither the writing nor the performances are good enough to sell the emotional beats. As Leo, Fares Fares (the director's brother) doesn't come close to matching his turn in The Nile Hilton Incident. He does, however, fare rather better than Eric Krogh as Vincent; Krogh's flat line delivery makes him sound either bored or faintly embarrassed by the whole thing.







ABOVE Most action scenes are harder to fail than to pass, such as this sequence where one of you drives while the other blasts pursuing cars with a shotgun. If you do make a mistake, checkpoints are fairly forgiving





MAIN Some scenes boast a number of incidental interactions. Often, they amount to snippets of filler dialogue that add nothing but unintentional comedy to the mix, though a handful yield rare Achievements or Trophies.
ABOVE Competitive challenges are scattered throughout, from wheelchair balancing to darts. This old-fashioned arcade game proves oddly captivating.
LEFT The two leads are usually in close proximity; as such, moments where their perspectives meaningfully differ are all too rare. In plot terms, a visit to a construction site doesn't amount to much, but the rooftop chase that ensues is a clear highlight

Extinction

The key to any good fight is an opponent that can keep you on your toes. Iron Galaxy should be well aware of this: its work on fighting games *Killer Instinct* and *Divekick* has proved this studio can produce dynamic scraps from, well, scraps. But *Extinction* is a wearying swing to the other end of the scale, a bloated and bland thirdperson action game that wouldn't know a good punch if one hit it in the face.

It's about as gormless as the enemies it pits you against. Gigantic ogres called the Ravenii have arrived from another world to blunder their way through this one. Avil is its last hope, a Sentinel warrior whose skill with a whip and blade allow him to grapple through the air, and clamber up to ogre's heads, slice the back of its neck, and fell the beast in a shower of gore.

It's a familiar refrain – almost identical, in fact, to that of Omega Force's *Attack On Titan* games. While repetitive, the strength of the story and design give them urgency: a charismatic cast, the skinless Titans with their chilling grins and taste for human flesh. In comparison, *Extinction* offers very little to care about. Avil's companion is the voice of an irritating engineer called Xandra, who exists mainly to state the obvious, update Avil on an escape portal she's creating, and occasionally call him a bastard. The randomly generated cities all end up looking identical – lifeless collections of repeated buildings punctuated by crystals, around which civilians stand motionless, waiting to be rescued. There's no real inclination to save them, other than the fact that beaming them up to the great Safe Zone In The Sky boosts your Rune Energy and Skill Points.

And if you thought the good guys were dull, wait until you meet the baddies. *Extinction*'s basic blade fodder, the Jackals, are as rent-a-grunt as they come, orcish minions with one attack. First come the regular ogres, then a blue sort that spit projectiles, then a winged species that can be grappled up to, and then, even better, a big, *red* version of the regular kind with an even *more* inflated health pool. They do nothing but expose the artlessness of Avil's standard combat, where you tap out the rhythms of a limited range of combos with a single button (if you try out anything but the basic button-mash string, which works in every situation). Meanwhile, the Ravenii themselves fail to inspire awe or fear. Yes, they're large, and will kill you in one hit, but their generic appearance and shared set of stock behaviours make them unexciting foes.

Speeding over cities to reach them can, at least, be entertaining enough. When the (poorly indicated) grapple spots happen to align in your favour, and with a few skill upgrades under your belt, Avil's movement abilities chain together nicely. Using just a couple of buttons, you can zip from a tree onto a building, climb the wall, spring from a roof into an air dash before throwing out the whip again. The first time you've pulled off an elegant loop up and around the Ravenii themselves, latching onto certain armour and buildings, you'll fancy yourself an acrobat.

Developer Iron Galaxy
Publisher Maximum Games
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

> It's a bloated and bland thirdperson action game that wouldn't know a good punch if one hit it in the face



EXTRA DISCREDIT
We try to squeeze some variety out of *Extinction*'s systems and bonus modes, but they lack any real substance. The skill tree is a meagre selection of movement and combat upgrades – bafflingly, several are already maxed out upon starting the game. None of them seem to dynamically change up the pace or encourage you to switch strategy, simply allowing you to jump a little higher, rescue citizens slightly faster or extend the time of your Rune Strike. There are various modes – daily challenges pit you versus an objective and the leaderboards, while Skirmish generates random maps for you to compete on – but it's all based on exactly the same repetitive foundation, and so the endless wave-based Extinction mode is about as appealing as it sounds.

If you were expecting to feel like a master warrior, however, you'll be disappointed. *Extinction* unwittingly casts you as the neighbourhood exterminator instead of a hero, as felling ogres becomes a case of going through the motions. Every type of Ravenii is killed in an identical fashion. First, you hack off limbs using a Rune Strike to charge your meter; when it's filled, you behead them in the exact same sanguinary manner every time. And when taking down a Ravenii isn't monotonous, it's infuriating. The controls feel gluey: triggering the slow-mo Rune Strike state or dodging a flailing fist always feels a few frames too late. Sometimes, it doesn't seem to register at all. When you're always half a second from getting one-shot, it's exasperating – as is aiming strikes at ultra-specific places on moving limbs in creepingly slow motion. We spend hours suspended inside armpits in bullet-time, trying to get at the tiny breakable locks on the insides of golden bracers before our Rune Strike runs out and we have to climb all over again.

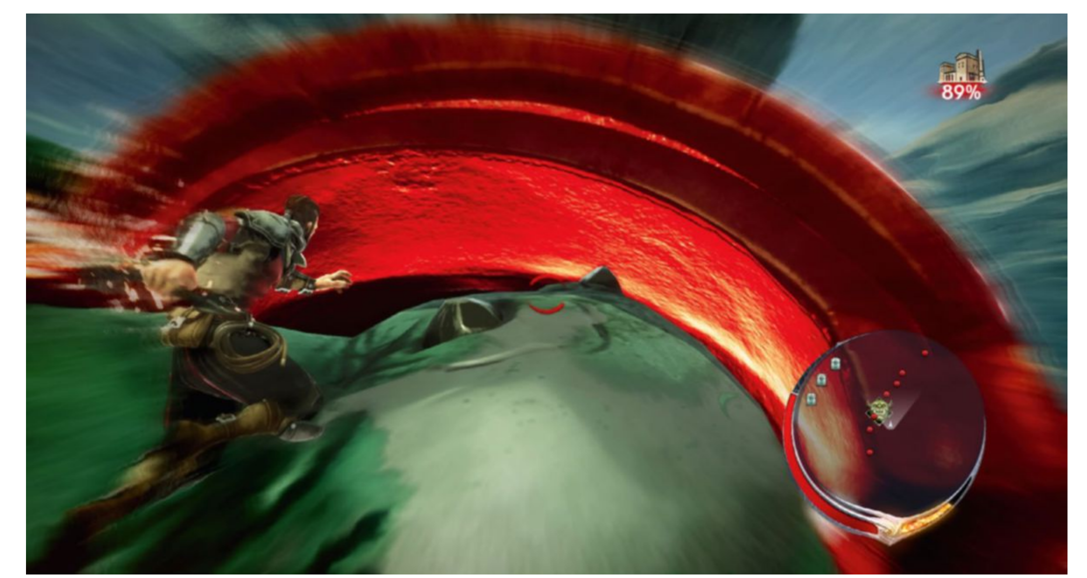
The armour system is Iron Galaxy's attempt to mix things up. Ravenii spawn in various combinations, which introduces some level of decision-making. Should you clamber up to smash an ogre's wooden bracers in one Rune Strike, exposing their arms? Or prioritise their legs? If they're clad in bone armour, you must wait until the skull's eyes are extinguished by shockwaves to shatter it – but a lame Ravenii is a dead one. An ogre wielding a club, meanwhile, can destroy a city faster, and it's best to disarm them without delay.

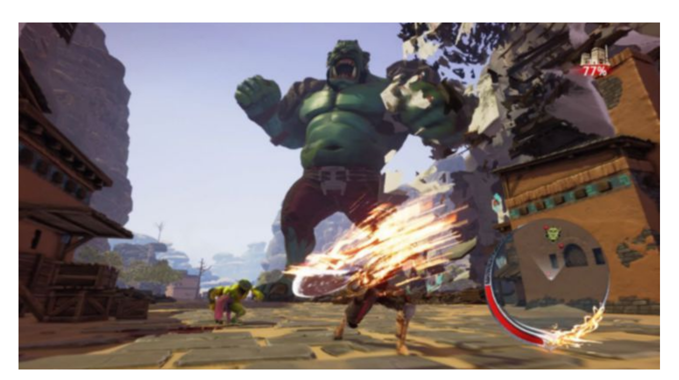
The reality, however, is that because every Ravenii responds in the same way, you'll quickly fall into routine. The first target is always the legs: every ogre will fall on its behind if just one is lopped off. Next, arms and armour pieces fill the meter, because we'd rather keep licking Ravenii armpit than spend another minute mashing away at minions or holding a button next to static civilians. Finally, the head's off, and it's onto the next one, Avil's paradoxically sluggish dash giving us time to think about why we're still playing.

Bar a few misguided platforming-based missions, some interminable Jackal-slaying assignments and a handful of optional side-objectives, that's your lot. Any difficulty can be wholly attributed to the game's overall clunkiness – whether that's the sticky controls, the misbehaving camera or the tedious process of aiming Rune Strikes – and by the time you're accustomed to working around its flaws, you're bored. *Extinction* is mindless, soulless stuff, and a huge disappointment from a reputable studio. When a developer finds so little of worth in an entire battle-torn world, you might as well just leave it to the ogres.

3

RIGHT If Avil's supposed to be an ancient warrior, we're not buying it. His trendy haircut and meticulously groomed beard are straight out of present-day Shoreditch.
BELOW Destructible landmarks can occasionally thwart strategies, but positioning Avil in the air via whip is so unreliable that we mostly stick to plain old ogre rodeo.
MAIN Stay too long on a Ravenii's shoulders, and a well-telegraphed hand will swat you. The haptic feedback of a death is jarring, and the smashed minimap a nice touch







ABOVE Civilian deaths at the hands of the Jackals aren't particularly consequential – it's more far efficient to protect buildings from Ravenii. Thank goodness, as the combat can't even touch the likes of *God Of War*



Scribblenauts Showdown

You want us to "use our words", *Scribblenauts Showdown*? Then use them we shall: we're flabbergasted at how competently you've managed to suck the joy out of 5th Cell's puzzle action series. The core idea remains: an in-game vocabulary of over 35,000 words lets you summon anything you can dream of as real things that you can use to solve puzzles. It's having the dictionary at your fingertips – and, by extension, the universe. But somehow, *Scribblenauts Showdown* manages to make you feel boxed in.

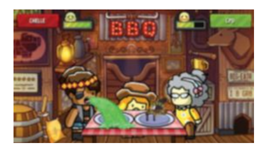
The eponymous mode, Showdown, pits you and up to three other players against each other in a *Mario Party*-style boardgame. Each player receives cards to play: most are associated with a particular twoplayer minigame that must be won to activate an effect – propelling you forward a few squares, or sending your opponent back a couple. If you lose your duel, however, the tables are turned, and that same effect is made to work against you.

There are two types of minigame to compete in: Wordy, and Speedy. Wordy games are at least vaguely engaging – a race has you thinking of fast things to ride to the finish line, while a speed-eating contest challenges you to think of something edible (and bite-size enough to help you finish first). But the controls are sticky, the physics floaty and the free-form nature of *Scribblenauts'* object system a chore in a competitive setting. We spend an interminable amount of time struggling through a fishing minigame when the spoon we create for "objects that are wooden" materialises as metal, meaning very few fish bite. The 12 available Wordy games might be asinine, but at least they aren't the 15 Speedy ones, which have you use motion controls and don't involve *Scribblenauts'* main party trick at all. There's not a lot to go around, then, and Showdowns soon become repetitive. (Versus mode, at least, allows you to play the minigames separately and more quickly.)

A rare glimmer of good old *Scribblenauts* can be found in the third, and final offering, Sandbox mode. Here, you're free to experiment with your rhetorical power in eight small but charming levels, and given a vague list of objectives to complete: leaving a suitable offering for a hungry buddha, for example, or helping a grumpy tiger fix a sore tooth. But it's a poor simulacrum of the previous games' open-world story mode: producing flamethrowers and turning yourself "dragonish" will always be a novelty, but within such meaningless and shallow confines, it soon wears off. It's astonishing that Shiver couldn't conjure up a decent party game from such great source material. Put it this way: the words we *really* want to use about *Scribblenauts Showdown* are the only ones that can't be found in its enviable dictionary.

3

Developer Shiver Entertainment
Publisher Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Format PS4, Switch (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now



NOT MY TYPE
The DS *Scribblenauts* games let you tap out letters on the touchscreen when spelling words – but bafflingly, the Switch's touchscreen goes completely unused. Instead, a strange set of selection wheels see you pressing buttons to open individual menus, then rotating the sticks to select each letter. It's clunky, and although your most recent words are saved to quickly select again, it mostly discourages the easy sense of creative freedom that pervaded previous titles.

Not all cards in Showdown mode involve minigames, with some offering instant effects to help you get ahead. Games can take up to 45 minutes if you've picked to play on a longer board, so boosts are particularly precious





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Minit

Minit's central premise sounds like a good theme for a game jam, and at times it can feel like it came from one too. In the opening moments of this monochromatic pixel-art adventure, our hero picks up a sword; it's cursed, it turns out, damning the bearer to die where he stands every 60 seconds, before respawning in front of the fire at home. From that central conceit unfurls a game of canny, and often quite annoying, design.

Boiling a game down to 60 seconds of (hopefully) fun is a fine idea with plenty of potential. Puzzles, for instance, are quick-fire and satisfying; yes, they might take you a few runs to suss out, but the eventual execution of one will take only a few seconds. The world, too, is cleverly designed, a looping construction full of *Souls*-esque moments as you pop out of a dungeon or building and find yourself back in a familiar area. It's condensed, yet far too big to be traversed in 60 seconds; cleverly placed homesteads – a trailer park, a hotel room – help bring everything within a minute's reach.

Naturally, most of what *Minit*'s central design hook produces are things intended to slow you down. There are enemies here, but they're not here to hurt you so much as get in the way; spend more than ten seconds on a cluster of enemies and you might as well throw in the towel, a single face-button press causing you to expire on the spot and respawn. Get stuck on some scenery and you'll consider doing the same, though the game doesn't force you into making frame-perfect runs, even if it can sometimes feel like it.

The world is gear-gated, but it's surprisingly open from the start, meaning you're often unsure where you should be headed next – we were carrying a press pass around for a good hour before we stumbled across the building it granted entry to – and it's during these moments of uncertainty that the strength of the premise starts to become a chore. With such a tight time limit, exploration is a pain; you spend most of your allotted minute getting to the bit you were stuck on, and after a precious few seconds of experimentation, you're back to the start.

Still, there's a lot to like about a game that sticks to its principles, particularly when it plays around with the knowledge that you're pushed for time. One of the first NPCs you encounter, sat by a lighthouse near your home, speaks absurdly slowly, his text box appearing one letter at a time, the only way of reading it all to sprint straight for him when you spawn. A little more of this, and less following, cluelessly, in your past selves' footsteps, and *Minit* would have lingered much longer in the memory.

6

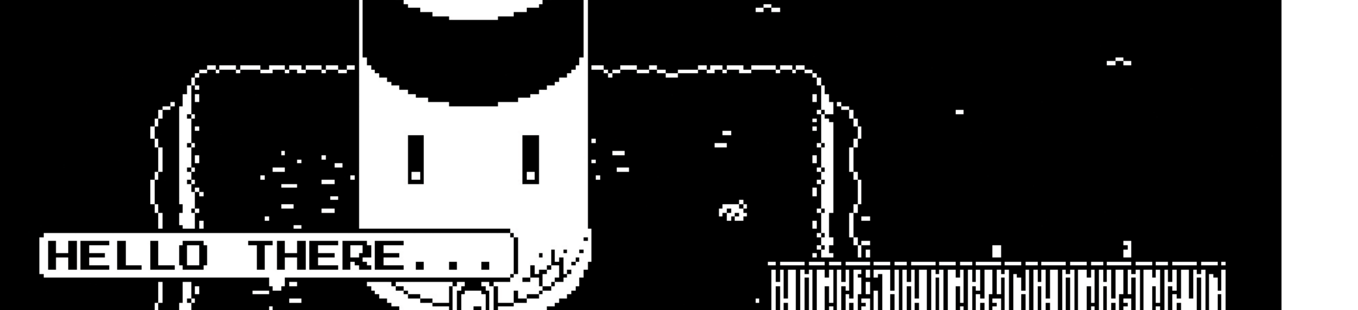
Developer Kitty Calis, Jukio Kallio, Jan Willem Nijman, Dominik Johann
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now



SECOND OPINIONS

In case the list of names in the 'Developer' section didn't tip you off, *Minit*'s dev team was a bit of an impromptu creation – the members won an Adventure Time-themed game jam in 2012 (and a crossbow as a prize) with their idea. They spent the next four years mulling it over, before showing Devolver a prototype and securing its help. The team is also an all-star outfit: Nijman and Kallio are part of Vlambeer, Johann is co-founder of Crows Crows Crows, and Calis is formerly of Guerrilla Games.

Unsurprisingly, *Minit* is proving well-suited to speedruns: at time of writing, the record is seven minutes and nine seconds. If you don't fancy going fast, New Game+ offers another challenge, cutting your lifetime to 40 seconds





Detective Pikachu

Reinventing *Pokémon*'s squeaky mascot as a gravel-throated, java-drinking gumshoe with back problems is an idea so preposterous it just might work. And so it proves: though *Detective Pikachu* the game has problems, Detective Pikachu the character is a delight, both cranky and sarcastic yet nevertheless clearly loving his job. There's something inherently funny about hearing him wax lyrical about the pleasant acidity and full body of a particular café's coffee, or when he grumpily accuses his human partner of freeloading. But beyond that subversive pleasure, he's simply a well-written character in his own right.

Any good detective needs a partner, of course, and so Pikachu teams up with amiable young chap Tim Goodman, whose name sums up his inoffensively earnest character. They essentially act as each other's translator: Tim is the only person who can understand Pikachu, while the latter quizzes the other Pokémon they meet during their investigations. Some cases seem designed to introduce as many creatures as possible, though their presence rarely feels like pandering fan service, with the script working hard to integrate them into the complexities of the various mysteries. An overarching plot thread involving Tim's missing father cleverly ties the cases together, providing an intriguing long-term goal beyond these short-form stories.

Each follows a similar structure: you'll explore a small locale, studying evidence and talking to witnesses, while solving the occasional environmental puzzle and completing super-easy quick-time action sequences. Sporadically, you'll be asked to make deductions with the evidence and testimony you've obtained – either by slotting icons into boxes or answering a multiple-choice quiz. There's no penalty for getting it wrong: you're simply invited to try again until you find the right answer. In that sense, it seems suited to younger players, though its inconsistencies might well frustrate them. Sometimes you can access the case notes before you're prompted; at others, you'll be unable to progress until you've exhausted a very specific line of enquiry.

That would be less of a problem if you weren't always one step ahead of these expert sleuths. A good mystery should make sense after the resolution; too often, these incidents follow a train of logic that's obvious from the early stages. In that light, its lead's epiphanies – or 'bolts of brilliance' – are his most underwhelming moments. Still, if it yields its secrets as readily as a twitchy suspect, there's much to admire here, not least its unlikely lead. Pikachu may not be a truly great mouse detective, but against all odds, he's terrific company.

6

Developer Creatures, Inc
Publisher Nintendo/The Pokémon Company
Format 3DS
Release Out now



FIGURE OUT
Occasionally, Pikachu will call his partner's name to alert him to something. Usually it's related to the case: a nudge in the right direction if you're unsure who to talk to or where to go, perhaps. At other times, it results in a brief context-sensitive animation. These skits can be amusing, but they're sometimes an unwanted interruption when you're in the middle of an investigation. Any you've missed can be unlocked from the main menu via a curiously oversized Detective Pikachu amiibo.

Though the 3D slider is unused, this is an unexpectedly well-presented game, with large, crisp, well-animated characters supported by perfectly decent voice acting. Let's hope Game Freak is taking notes





SteamWorld Dig

Mining one of gaming's most satisfying loops

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer/publisher Image & Form **Format** 3DS, PC, PS3, PS4, Switch, Vita, Wii U, Xbox One **Release** 2013

The loop is irresistible. Dig down to find precious minerals before your lamp dies, then return to the surface to sell them and buy a better pickaxe or lamp. Then you go back down, steadily progressing farther into the ground, finding more valuable minerals to sell and buying more effective gear. *SteamWorld Dig* taps into one of the most satisfying power fantasies in videogames, a sustained balance of reward and risk as your abilities grow in lockstep with ever-deepening challenge. Rusty, your little robot miner, will need to travel farther in the dark of the below and face more dangerous enemies, his achievements only presenting greater hurdles, and as his upgrades rise in cost you'll need greater winnings from deposits that can only be found even deeper. It's a game of constant progress and yet you stay in the same place, in a sweet spot where the game flows effortlessly, down and down, passing Copper and Dolomite, Lazurite and Red Gold.

Or is that Copper Ore and Horrolite Ore? Or, for that matter, is it Bronzium and Amazonite? Deep within *SteamWorld Dig*'s foundations are buried the remains of other games. Copper Ore is one of the first minerals you find in *Miner Dig Deep*, which was released in 2009 on Xbox Live Indie Games. Developed by three brothers, James, Brendan and Will Ribaux, this platformer has you digging down from the surface to, again, find precious minerals. Less than nimble, you'll need to carve tunnels and build infrastructure such as ladders and elevators to give you quick access to the surface again. The longer you spend below ground, the shorter the radius of light your lamp throws out, concealing hazards and treasures around you. Rocks will fall, *Dig Dug*-style, if you burrow beneath them, crushing you as you attempt to reach some ore, and falling too far will kill you.

Bronzium, meanwhile, is one of the first ores you find in *Motherload*. A Flash game released in September 2004 by a Canadian game maker called Skye Boyes, *Motherload* is probably where this mining loop began, even if Boyes was looking back to *Dig Dug* and *Boulder Dash*. Players pilot a mining machine to keep fuelled as they dig down into the surface of Mars. Perfectly designed for browser play, it's quick to understand and get into but presents a stern challenge. Runs will suddenly end as you run out of fuel or accrue too much damage from falling, but it's also designed to be completed in a session or two. As with any game that bottles an irresistible loop inside a compelling theme, various copies of *Motherload* appeared on Flash portals over the next few years, but beyond them, its ideas can also be found in *Minecraft* – which is to say they were also in *Minecraft*'s inspiration, Zach Barth's *Infiniminer*. And they're therefore also in the games that followed *Minecraft*, from *Terraria* to *Subnautica*. *SteamWorld Dig*, though, is where *Motherload*'s core has found its purest expression.

If it wasn't acted out by robots playing jaunty Western archetypes, *SteamWorld Dig* would have an air of tragic loss and desperation. It begins in destitution, with Rusty having travelled to a down-on-its-luck town where his uncle has a mine. The town is almost deserted, the mine is defunct, and his uncle has gone missing. But Rusty is a doughty figure, and when he finds his uncle's body down one of his forgotten mineshafts, he picks up his old pickaxe and is immediately swept up into the game loop, and the tone becomes hopeful. Rusty injects increasingly precious ores and gems into the town's economy; new and returning residents are attracted to open new shops, a minor clockwork parable for hard toil being salvation for all.

But you won't be thinking about that, since you'll be too immersed in the moment-to-moment action of mining and the circadian rhythm of travelling between town and coalface and back again. While *Miner Dig Deep*'s platforming and mining is awkward and stilted, with a crude swing and restricted movement, and *Motherload*'s miner is fragile and limited, Rusty's trot, run and jump are flowing, and his pickaxe strikes cleanly and precisely. He can sprint, giving him higher leaps; he has a wall-jump, and can slow his falls by skidding down. Simply running Rusty through your tunnels is a joy. After all, they are *your* tunnels, a fact which lends a heightened sense of ▶



SteamWorld Dig was first released on 3DS, and used its stereoscopic display to layer foreground over background, to lovely effect

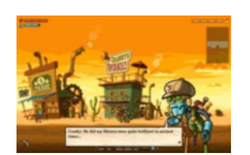
ownership and involvement to just getting around. They're the result of decisions you made as you prospected, cutting through to prized ores and building access passages. How easy they are to traverse is down to how cleverly you mined them, the awkward bits where you need a running jump to reach a shaft leading upwards a permanent record of a mistake, or perhaps your imperfect solution to mining around an area of rock your pickaxe can't destroy. There are records of disasters you faced, too, such as when an explosion took out the earth beneath a boulder, causing it to fall through the softer strata below and crush you.

As you make mistakes, you'll learn good ways to mine. Extend your tunnels widely across upper layers to better enable you to dig down to reach the lower ones, since you can't mine upwards more than one block. Reach across a shaft to mine its opposite side. Give boulders healthy respect. And while the earth is filled with enemies, open spaces are your real bane, since they limit Rusty's ability to wall-climb. And all the while you'll be thinking about where to place your hard-earned teleports, which transport you back to the surface. Each teleport is a base camp, a permanent location from which you can go and restock your supplies and cash in, since when you die you'll lose all you've collected as well as a portion of your purse. From them you'll burrow and extract the riches from the ground, taming the frontier into familiarity.

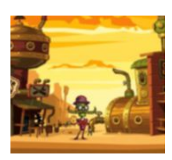
But while your mine is self-built, *SteamWorld Dig* also feels like something of a dig-your-own *Metroid*. The enemies you face are distinctly Metroidian, such as armoured Turtles, which spray out a set of spikes at you, and the grub-like Trilobites, which patrol back and forth in air pockets or sit dormant in the rock and burst out when you come close. And *SteamWorld Dig*'s three areas, each procedurally generated at the start of a new game, are thick with a lonely atmosphere. Each comprises a different balance of rock types, resources and enemies; after the uncomplicated threats of the first area, Archaea, The Old World is immediately more daunting, dripping with acid, laced with proximity-triggered explosives, and inhabited by Shiners – irradiated and maddened humans who throw dynamite. Voltron is all metals and greys, with magnetic blocks to complicate your passage. They pace your downward journey in a way that captures *Metroid*'s sense of self-driven discovery, so when you reach story-imposed waypoints you feel it's a natural reward for the journey you took to get to it, even if it's all strictly preordained.

Metroid's essence is also in the special abilities you earn, such as the Drill, Steam Jump and Steam Punch, since they encourage you to revisit previous locations, now you can jump higher and punch though stronger rock. Each gives new breadth to your ability to extend your mine, giving you new mastery over your own kingdom while

AT THE END, YOU REALISE THAT ALL THESE ABILITIES, AND ALL THE PROGRESS YOU MADE TO GET THEM, WAS A TRAP



You'll continually revisit the town on the surface to sell ores and upgrade abilities



MINE STRIKE

SteamWorld Dig's ultimate inspiration, *Motherload*, was designed by Skye Boyes, who founded a small but prolific webgame developer called XGen Studios. Its success brought a sequel, 2013's *Super Motherload*, which was a PS4 launch game, but though it added fourplayer co-op and featured an arcade-like combo system to mining ores to maximise earnings, many reviews complained that it was too repetitive, its loop a little naked, perhaps. Certainly, the rate at which fuel depletes makes the loop a little too rigid and quick, and it lacks the pleasure and skill of control in *SteamWorld Dig*, which came out two months before it and has a lot more personality. Boyes died in 2015, but XGen Studios, now run by his wife, lives on, its most recent release being 2017 spy adventure game *The Low Road*.

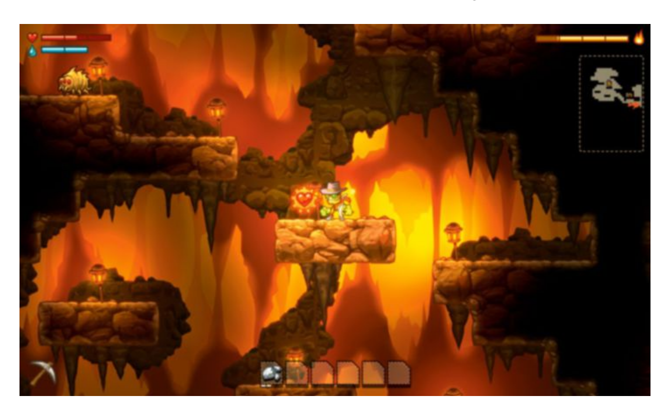


The mines feature entrances to designed puzzle-like levels, which present challenges that you'll need to use your abilities to beat

also giving you new preoccupations, since now you'll have to worry about having enough water – naturally, the abilities are steam-driven – to use them. *SteamWorld Dig* knows how unfettered power can be deadening for a game, so Rusty's upgrades always come with a new layer of responsibility to manage their use and keep them special.

At the end of the game, you realise that all these abilities, and all the progress you made to get them, was a trap. *SteamWorld Dig* delivers its story lightly, through a few conversations and a natural urge to dig deeper, but it becomes clear that Rusty's uncle was killed by a shadowy enemy called Voltbot, a computer which has designs on ruling the world. Voltbot is incomplete and needs a fully upgraded Rusty to merge with it, and has seeded the ground with all the special abilities and upgrade orbs you've been happily collecting. From a parable about work ethic, it suddenly veers into a meta commentary on the nature of progress in games, keenly dissecting the tension between player self-determination and authored design. Though you're cutting your own tunnels through *SteamWorld Dig*'s underworld, nothing truly lies off the path, and nothing hasn't already been considered by its designers. Even when you try to sequence break, the game is waiting for you. To get to Voltbot, you'll need to get past a door protected by three lasers which are powered by three generators scattered through the areas you've already journeyed through, and if you destroy them before you get to the lasers, you'll be awarded the Sequence Break achievement. The game is quite aware of how much freedom it's giving you to progress.

But *SteamWorld Dig*'s core loop is so strong that most players won't care they're being pulled along for the ride, just as they won't notice that the game itself is built so much from other games. That's not to take from *SteamWorld Dig* for a moment, since all games are built from others, and this one is particularly beautifully crafted. To see *Motherload*'s design so fully realised is a measure of its potential, of the delight in progression that goes nowhere and the power of the suggestion of freedom. It's driven by a loop that exists across all games – gather, upgrade, gather again and upgrade more – but it's rarely articulated better. ■



Beating enemies may leave pickups that restore light, health and water levels





A progress report on the games we just can't quit



Splatoon 2

Developer/publisher Nintendo **Format** Switch **Release** 2017

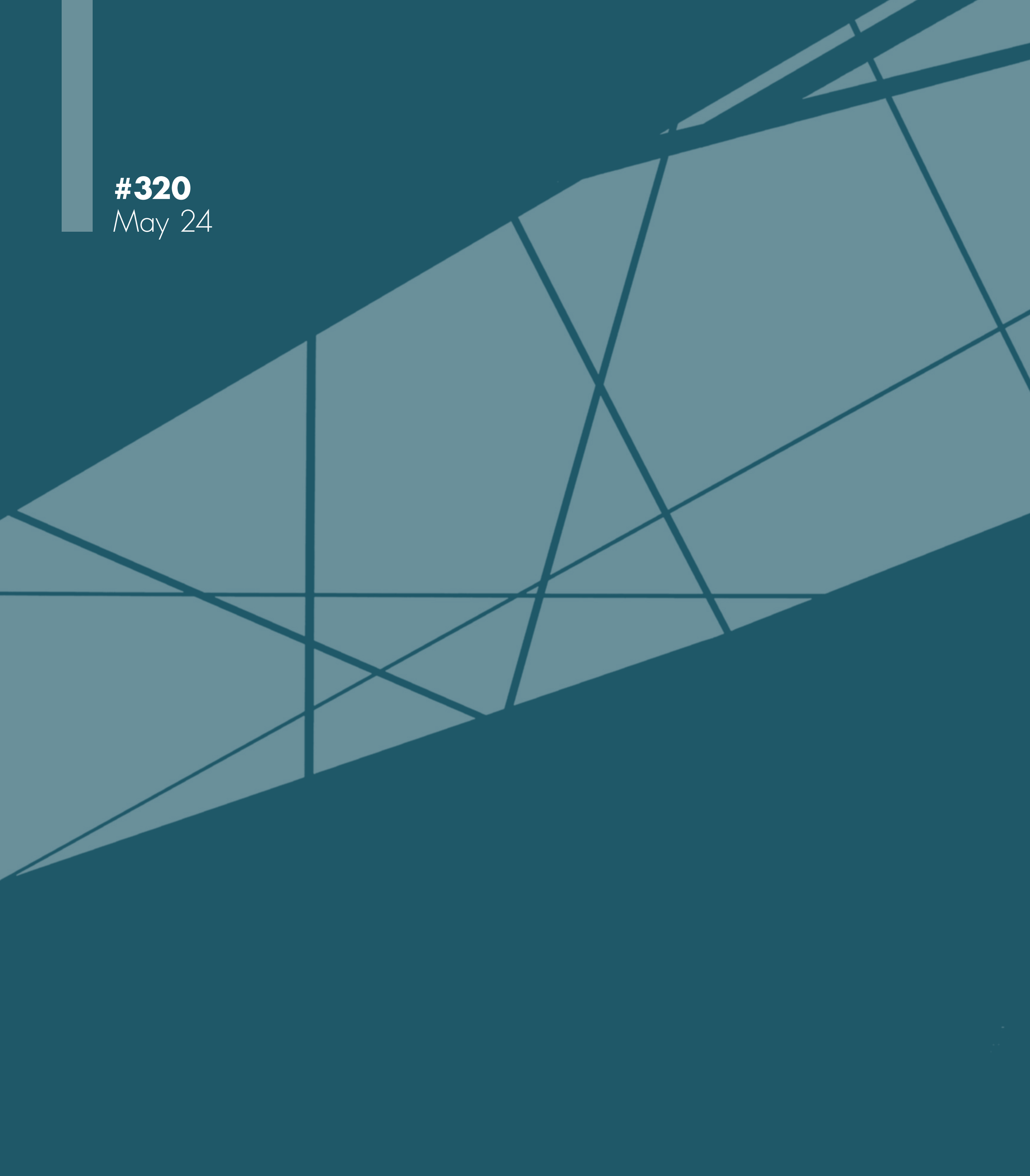
That *Splatoon*'s Inklings were chosen to tease the imminent arrival of *Super Smash Bros* on Switch says much for how big the series has become. *Splatoon 2* has already outstripped its predecessor in sales – no huge surprise given Switch's popularity relative to Wii U – and in the number of available maps. By its final content update, *Splatoon* had 16; the sequel's topped that, and there's plenty more to come.

It helps that it can lean on old favourites, with new maps such as Manta Maria and Snapper Canal joined by the likes of Arowana Mall, Kelp Dome and Walleye Warehouse. Each of the oldies has been remixed: the central tower is still the focal point of the returning Blackbelly Skatepark, but it's been widened and spawn positions rejigged. Every original map, meanwhile, seems to offer something different. The supermarket sweep of MakoMart gets straight to the action with a quick route to the central area, while ink rails on Shellendorf Institute let you zip up to an overhead gantry to get the drop on rivals.

The beauty of *Splatoon 2* is that its game modes don't require a tutorial. The UI gives you everything you need to read the state of play: crucial for a game in which you communicate through actions rather than words. A fourth ranked variant, Clam Blitz, initially seems to buck the trend – perhaps because, unlike other game types, it has no easy analogue. You might think it's been built to encourage players to use the online app for voice chat, and yet it soon becomes second nature: by B rank, your teammates will have grasped the value of throwing clams to advanced allies, and of keeping the basket defended.

One downside to *Splatoon 2*'s increasing bulk is that its structure can feel all the more restrictive. You're limited to a single ranked mode during each two-hour window, unless you can find friends to join you for league matches. Otherwise, it could be as long as eight hours until your chosen mode is available, and probably much longer for your favourite map – the obvious advantage being that lobby waits can be measured in seconds. Meanwhile, the absence of verbal communication makes it feel an altogether more wholesome brand of online game. The low tick rate and disconnecting teammates might have you swearing like a trooper, but at least no one will hear you.

Those nagging irritations aside, *Splatoon 2* keeps giving its players reasons to return, from Splatfests to Salmon Run shifts. This summer's premium singleplayer expansion looks extremely promising; in the meantime, 100 new pieces of gear and three more maps are keeping the freebies rolling in. Barely six weeks after it was announced that Nintendo's other big online game wouldn't be getting any further updates, Inkopolis has never seemed more vibrant. *Arms*' race appears to be run, but *Splatoon 2* should stay fresh throughout the next year and beyond. ■



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